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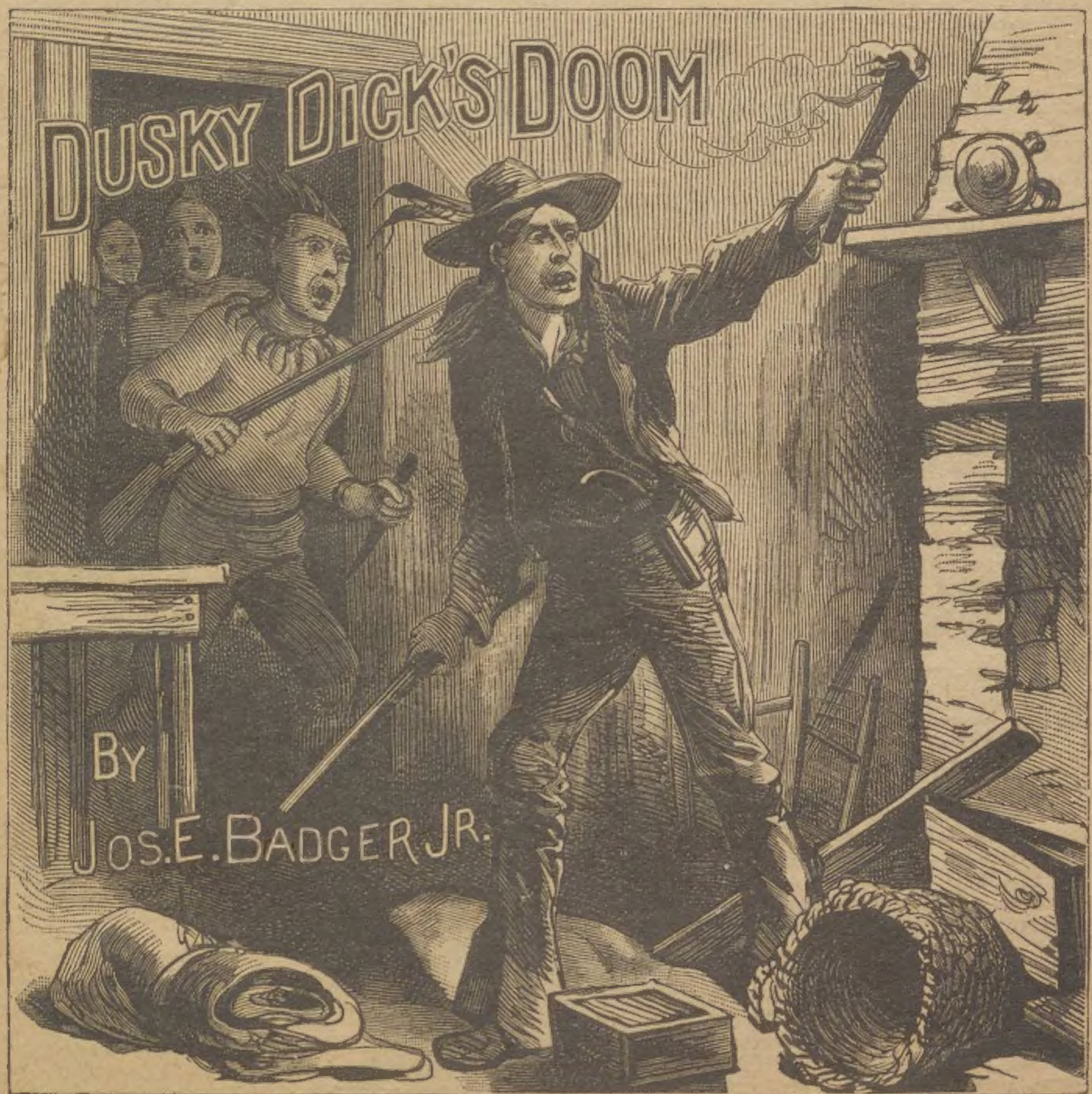
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AS THE GLARE FILLED THE ROOM, AN ANGRY ROAR BROKE FROM HIS LIPS.

Dusky Dick's Doom;

OR,

Tobe Castor, the Old Scout.

A Story of the Sioux Outbreak.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "THE PRAIRIE RANCH," "MARI-
POSA MARSH," "ROUND THE CAMP-
FIRE," "THE COLORADO
BOYS," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

DUSKY DICK'S PROPOSAL.

"ANNIE, girl, who is that coming up the spring path? Ah, me! I fear my old eyes are beginning to fail me at last!"

"Coming up the— Ugh! father, it is that Dick Morgan!"

"Dusky Dick—what can he want here, I wonder?" and there was a cadence of mingled uneasiness and dislike perceptible in the old man's tones that told too plainly the advancing figure was not that of a welcome or respected guest.

The first speaker was an old man, whose head was frosted by the snows of over half a century and whose form—still athletic and supple—was beginning to bow beneath the weight of years. An honest, open face was that of old Edward Wilson; a true index of his heart.

He was sitting in the doorway of his humble log cabin, smoking the well-blackened pipe as a dessert to supper, just finished. But as he spoke the last words, he roused himself up and stood with crossed arms in the doorway, as though he would fain bar the intruder out, who was now within a few paces of the building.

The form of this man was clothed in a rough garb of tanned skin and woolen stuff, despite the warm weather, and a broad-brimmed slouched hat rested upon his head, concealing the upper portion of his face from casual view. A long-barreled rifle rested carelessly in the hollow of his left arm, while the haft of a knife, and a revolver butt peeped from the belt at his waist.

"Good-evenin', Wilson, and the same to you, Miss Annie," he uttered in a clear strong voice, as he half paused, and then with a careless gesture pushed the hat away from his brow.

The clear mellow light of the full moon shone down upon him, and fairly revealed his features. A glance at them may not be amiss, as this worthy is destined to figure somewhat prominently in our narrative.

At the first glance, a strange peculiarity about him would attract the gaze, and leave an unpleasant impression upon the mind of the beholder. And yet it was not that the man was so hideous, in features.

But there was a strange tint to his entire face and neck that involuntarily repelled one. And from this had come the sobriquet, known far and wide throughout the western country of DUSKY DICK.

Indeed, more than one person who was well acquainted with him, would have been puzzled

to have told whether he ever had any other name. And Morgan seemed to be rather proud of the title, than otherwise.

In some way he had been badly burned by an explosion of powder, and though no other scars were perceptible, this bluish tinge caused by the burned powder penetrating the skin, remained clear and distinct. The dye did not fade as he grew older, but seemed to deepen and show brighter.

His features were regular and clear cut; his face was kept smooth shorn, though the black Indian-like hair hung far down his shoulders. There were not a few who secretly asserted that he came by this last trait fairly, and wondered only that he had not the curved nose and high cheek-bones as well.

His black eyes were of a fair size, but dull and sleepy-looking, save when he was angered; then one was strangely reminded of an infuriated serpent, so wicked did they flash and scintillate. In form he was tall, broad-shouldered and well built, being somewhat noted for his skill in the use of weapons, fleetness of foot and prowess as a wood-ranger.

"Good-evening, Dick," coldly uttered the settler in reply, evidently not caring to encourage the man, as he still stood in the narrow doorway, without a hint for the other to enter.

"Heard the news?" added Dusky Dick as a slight frown crossed his face, and a smoldering glow lit up his dark eyes.

"No—I don't know as I have. What is it?" listlessly responded Wilson as he deliberately crushed up some 'natural leaf,' and crammed it into the wide-mouthed pipe-bowl. "Bring me a coal, Annie."

"'Bout the red-skins. They've got tha'r backs up at last, and tha'r's goin' to be the tallest kind of a muss afore the thing's over," and there seemed to be a faint tinge of exultation in the tones of the speaker, that did not escape the keen-witted borderer.

"How is it that you know so much of their feelings, Dusky Dick? A body might almost think you were one of them, by the way you talk."

Morgan gave vent to a low laugh—deep, smooth and mellow, but yet filled with a peculiar meaning. Then he replied:

"I travel fur and keep my ears open, neighbor, as a man must needs do in these troubled times and in a new country. I have kivered nigh onto fifty miles to-day since sun-up. I stopped here to tell you the news. If you think it's wu'th offerin' a feller a cheer and a bite of somethin' to eat, I'll tell you it all. If not, then we'll call it quits and I'll go funder."

"Come in—I did not think," added Wilson, a little abashed, for border hospitality is proverbial. "Annie, give him what we have. Fall to, friend, and welcome."

With a nod toward Mrs. Wilson, who was seated at the further end of the rude apartment, quietly knitting, Dusky Dick took a seat at the table and helped himself liberally to the plain though palatable viands that Annie hastened to replace upon the table. The girl then ignited a rude lamp, and retreated to the side of her mother.

We do not intend describing the building. It

was a regular frontier cabin, made of logs roughly hewn, "chinked" with billets of wood, daubed over with stiffened clay. The walls were unpapered, and the furniture of the rudest description, the majority of it "home made," the ax and auger being the principal tools used.

But one of the inmates, at least, deserves more than a passing notice, as she will figure quite prominently before the reader in this tale of border life and trials. This one is Annie Wilson.

Barely five feet in height, she was a model of feminine grace and beauty, tempered and strengthened by the life of freedom and health-giving exercise of the past two years. Her form had filled and rounded to superb symmetry, her cheek glowed with the hue of health and spirits; at eighteen she was a woman, in the truest sense of the word.

Her hair was of a rich golden brown, her eyes, large and lustrous, were deep blue; her nose, of a faintly Roman type, gave a decisive expression to her countenance, that was softened by the small, ruby-lipped mouth, from which gleamed twin rows of pearly teeth whenever she smiled, and caused a cunning dimple to play upon the softly-rounded chin.

Dusky Dick ate voraciously, but yet found time to cast more than one admiring glance toward the border beauty, which were by no means welcome, judging from the scornful turn of the bright red lips and the flashing of her blue eyes as the maiden bent over some rough mending. Then Morgan arose and approached the settler, who was still smoking.

"You don't ask me the news," he uttered, in a disagreeable tone, as he squatted down upon the doorstep.

"I knew you'd tell it without," was the quiet reply.

"Yes, that's what I stopped fer. The Sioux are goin' to raise partic'lar Cain 'fore long."

"Are you sure?"

"I hed it from tha'r own lips," was the confident reply.

"You seem to be very thick with them, Dick. Some might think it strange they should tell you this, unless you were in with them thicker than an honest man should be," and the settler gazed keenly at his visitor.

"They'd best not say so in my hearin'," muttered Morgan, with an ominous scowl. "But I've al'ays acted on the square with 'em, and so they give me the hint. It's been brewin' for a long time, and they've made up tha'r minds not to stand any more of this everlastin' cheatin'. But never mind that jest now. I had other motives in stoppin' here," and Dusky Dick cast a sidelong glance at the sturdy settler—a glance that had in it not a little uneasiness.

"If there is anything else that I should know, Dick Morgan, now's the time to say it."

"What d' you intend doin', anyhow?"

"About what?"

"Why—the Injuns, o' course."

"They will not trouble me—anyhow, I shall stay here until I am more sure of what they intend doing. I won't leave my property without good cause."

"You'll git rubbed out, then, shore. You remember Sloan Young? You turned him out o' doors once, because he was drunk—"

"Because he insulted the women, the dirty half-breed," angrily interjected Wilson.

"Well, I don't know. Anyhow, he's a big man 'mong some o' the Injuns, and he swears he will use this chance to rub you out. Now I don't like Young, and I'll save you, if you say so. *Petit Corbeau* is a strong friend o' mine, and will back me ag'inst Young. What do you say?"

"Speak plain. You are holding something back, Dusky Dick. Why should you do all this for me? We have not been such close and intimate friends as all that comes to. What is it you mean?"

The other appeared somewhat discomposed at this straightforward speech, and his treacherous eyes shifted uneasily and fell from before the steady gaze of the old settler. But then he responded, with a forced laugh:

"You're in a awful hurry, Wilson, but so be it. I'll come to the p'int at once, and then we may see the way clear before us. Then it 'mounts to jest this. I'll agree to save your stock, house, crap and your lives. I'll engage that you sha'n't be bothered a mite, no matter how badly other families are sarved—if you'll promise me that Miss Annie yander, shall marry me, jest's soon's this trouble is fa'rly over. There, now!" and the fellow uttered a sigh of relief.

"Father!" exclaimed Annie, rising from her chair.

"Wait, daughter," and Wilson waved his hand for her to keep silence. "Dick Morgan, are you in earnest about this matter?"

"In earnest? Why, of course I am. I'll do all I—"

"Hold on—don't take too much for granted, my man, or you may be disappointed. I thought you knew me better than to come here with any such proposition as this. But since you did not, let me tell you that I think you are a precious fool and dirty scoundrel, and that the sooner you take yourself away from here, the better it will be for both of us," and the stalwart settler arose erect, his eyes flashing and his fists close clinched.

"Stand back, Ed Wilson—keep your distance or it'll be the worse for you!" muttered Dusky Dick, as he involuntarily retreated a pace, at the same time throwing his rifle-muzzle forward.

"Don't threaten, you cowardly cur, or I'll forget myself and give you something to growl at. There is your road. Take it and begone, and don't let me ever see your ugly face 'round here again. Go!"

"Hold on a bit, Wilson," and a vicious glitter filled the desperado's eyes as his fingers nervously manipulated the rifle-lock. "Better think twice afore you throw away your chance. I tell you ag'in, that if you don't agree to my plans, you won't live to be a day older. You'll all be killed and skelped. You can't run away, fer you're watched by those who would be only too glad of a chance to plug ye! Do as I said; promise me *her*, and I'll save you all. If you don't, then—"

"Hold!" rung out a clear, firm voice, as a light, agile figure sprang before the sturdy settler. "Hold! Uncock that gun, or I'll send

a bullet through your black heart! Uncock it, I say—and now you leave!”

It was Annie who had thus interrupted the conversation, and probably prevented a tragedy, for the treacherous villain had cocked his rifle, unobserved by Wilson, intending to shoot down one whom he feared to face openly. But the watchful eye of the daughter had noted his action, and, grasping the ready rifle, had checked his purpose, as detailed.

Edward Wilson realized the peril he had so narrowly escaped, and, as the baffled villain shrunk back from before the threatening muzzle pointed by the dauntless girl, he uttered a cry of rage, and with one enormous bound, covered the intervening distance and stood beside Dusky Dick. Then one brawny hand clutched the scoundrel's throat, while the other arm was drawn back to deliver a crushing blow.

Morgan dropped his rifle to remove the grip upon his throat, the weapon exploding as it fell. But before he could raise a hand, the hard, heavy fist of the settler shot out and alighted full between his eyes, with a crushing *thud*, hurling the man twice his length away.

With an angry howl, Morgan sprung up and whipped out his knife—a long, venomous-looking blade—and crouched down like a planther ready to spring. Then again did the voice of Annie ring out:

“Mind yourself, Dusky Dick! I have you covered, and I know how to use a rifle. One step forward and down you go!”

“You see we have the best of you this time,” quietly added Wilson, but with a menacing ring in his low voice. “Take your gun and begone. ’Twould only serve you right if I shot you down like a dog—as you meant to serve me; but I let you go this time. But the next—*look out!*”

Dusky Dick did not reply until he had secured his rifle. Then retreating a pace he spoke:

“And you look out. You’ve struck me. Good! A man never does that a *second* time. I’ll be even with you yet—and with *her*, too. You hold the cards now—my time’ll come soon. Jest put that in your pipe and smoke it. Maybe you’ll remember it afore long,” and with a hard laugh the baffled desperado turned away from the spot.

The settler stood gazing after him irresolutely for a moment, but then turned toward the cabin door. Annie’s voice checked him:

“Who is that coming, father?”

A tall, agile figure was rapidly approaching the cabin from the not very distant woods, bearing a rifle, as could be seen by the clear moonlight. But whether an Indian or a white, could not be told, as the dress partook about equally of both races.

“Hellow, *you!*” cried a high-pitched, peculiar voice, that plainly bespoke the white man. “Ain’t shootin’ at the moon, be ye? Got plenty o’ powder, I reckon.”

“Tobe Castor, by all that’s good!” exclaimed Wilson, springing forward to meet the newcomer, in evident delight. “You are just the man of all others that I wanted to see.”

“Sho! don’t say so? Want to know? Ain’t jokin’, be ye?” and then the two men warmly clasped hands, like friends of a life-long standing.

“Come, Tobe; supper’s over, but I guess there is something left. What brought you up this way so early in the season?”

“Don’t ax me now—wait until *they* ain’t lis’enin’,” muttered the man, cautiously; then adding aloud: “Howdy, Miss Annie? Purtier’n ever, by gnm! Beats all natur’ how you *do* keep on a-gittin’ so. Sorter selfish, ain’t ye, now? Got your own an’ a dozent more, besides—o’ good looks, I mean. Wings ’most began to grow, ain’t they?” and with a fatherly freedom, the weather-beaten old borderer stooped and imprinted a kindly kiss upon the fair face upturned toward his.

“Your tongue has lost none of its cunning, I see, anyhow, Uncle Tobe,” laughed the maiden, not unpleased.

“It’s a lookin’-glass, so fur’s *you’re* consarned, gal. But ef you will, I’m dretful hungry—hain’t hed a bite fur ’most two weeks, ’cept at odd spells. Ef you’ve got anythin’ in the grub line thet is in danger o’ bein’ spiled, jest please trot it out, while I talk with Ed, hyar.”

In obedience to a nod from Castor, Wilson led the way to a little distance and then briefly detailed the purport of Dusky Dick’s visit. Then he anxiously awaited the comments of his visitor.

“The dirty whelp! You’d orter ’a’ shot him like a pole-cat! *He* merry—oh! *git* out! Makes me *mad*—durned ef it don’t, now! Jest to think. Oh *won’t* I—thet’s all; ef ever I git mud-hooks on the pesky critter! But wait a bit. He told you the truth, Ed; yas, he did, so fur’s the reds risin’ is consarned. They’re goin’ to do it—ef i’d deed they hain’t begun a’ready. They’re jest goin’ to chaw up the hull kentry afore they stop. Thar’s goin’ to be jest a *leetle* the liveliest time you *ever* see’d, ’fore it’s eended.”

“Do you think so?”

“I *know* so—fer shure. An’ you’re in a bad place hyar—a pesky mean place, Ed,” impressively added Castor.

“What do you advise?”

“Jest this. Take your fambly an’ pack up. Git out o’ hyar like ’twas ha’nted. Pull up stakes an’ travel.”

“And leave the farm—lose my two years of hard work?”

“Better thet then lose your skelps an’ it with the rest. An’ thet’s jest what you’ll do ef you stay. I tell you, Ed, it’s a serious bizness, this is. Dusky Dick told you the truth o’ the plans o’ the imps. An’ then you’ve sot *him* ag’in’st you, too. He’s got Injun blood in him. A pity it happined jest now, though I don’t blame you, not a bit, but you’d orter never ’a’ let him git away. He’ll bring the imps down on ye, *shore*. He’s a big dog ’th a brass collar ’mongst *some* o’ them—the wu’st o’ the lot, ef thet kin be, whar all is so bad. *He’s* the one you must look out fer the most.”

“You think he’s in league with them?”

“I *know* it fer shore. But whar’s Fred?”

“Over at Stevens’s.”

“Mought ’a’ knowed *thet* ’thout axin’: but I don’t blame the feller a mite. Jinnie’s a mighty purty gal, an’ ef I wasn’t so old an’ uglv, an’ she wasn’t so smart, an’ all else went ’cordin’, an’ she didn’t say *no*, durned ef I didn’t hitch onto her *myself*. But never mind thet now. What ’re you goin’ to do?”

"What do you advise, Tobe?"

"Jest this: Take sech things as you cain't do 'thout an' don't want to leave, an' strike out fer the bigger settlements. I tell you, ef you stay hyar, to-morrow this time won't see ary one o' your skelps on the place whar natur' 'lowed fer 'em to grow," earnestly added Castor.

"Father!" called out the clear, sweet voice of Annie at this juncture, "all's ready."

"Come, Tobe; eat a bite and I will settle my plans. I'll let you know then," added Wilson, turning toward the cabin.

CHAPTER II.

A FORTUNATE DISCOVERY.

CASUAL mention has been made of one "Fred," who was the oldest child—and only surviving son—of Edward Wilson. He had left the forest cabin only a few minutes before the advent of Dusky Dick, barely taking time to finish his supper.

Tobe Castor was correct in his shrewd guess as to what had attracted him so far, after a hard day's work; although probably Fred would have denied the "soft impeachment," had any one told him that it was only to see and chat with Jennie Stevens, that he so frequently traversed the three-mile path that intervened between the two houses. But such was indeed the case.

And if the truth must be told, Fred had a faithful ally in the enemy's camp, too, in the shape of John Stevens, who appeared to be profoundly impressed with the good qualities of the young borderer, and seemed resolved that Jennie should also entertain the same ideas. But Jack would have been very wroth, no doubt, had any one hinted that he was playing a part; that it was partly the reflected light of Annie's perfections that made him so esteem Fred.

The latter personage, then, was swiftly striding along the faintly-defined trail, his thoughts busy with a momentous subject. He was picturing the future as he would wish it to be: a home, a wife—who, strangely enough, always possessed Jennie's face and form—a growing family of little ones—when suddenly he paused and bent his head in an attitude of acute attention.

He heard a shrill, peculiar whistle ring out from only a few yards before him, evidently in the same trail. But what increased his surprise was that an answer came, like an echo; this time from some little distance to his right.

Fred knew that the country was in a troubled state; he had closely watched the signs that portended the coming of a storm that, should it fall, would sweep all before it with resistless fury. And now a premonition of coming peril weighed upon his spirit like a revelation.

Without pausing to reflect, he glided out from the path and crouched down amid the dense undergrowth, his ears strained to catch any sounds that might either confirm or banish his suspicions. At first he could hear nothing, but then the low murmuring of human voices was borne to his hearing upon the gentle night breeze.

He knew that the speakers, whoever they

might be, were approaching, and in a few moments more Fred could distinguish the words, which were spoken in the Sioux dialect. Thanks to a border life and acquiring spirit, the young settler was slightly conversant with the *patois*; sufficiently so to follow the meaning of the speakers.

The first words he caught, caused his heart to throb wildly, and he crouched forward, fearing almost to breathe, lest he should lose a sentence.

"Then we are to strike the first blow to-night?"

"Yes. Inkpaduta gave the word and said that *Petit Corbeau* told him so. He bade Long Hair take his choice. He chose the people of the lodge by the great stone. Dusky Dick chose the one—"

Here the words became unintelligible to the listener, the party having passed on by his place of concealment.

Fred arose and glided stealthily after them. He had no difficulty in recognizing the allusion to "the people by the great stone." He knew that the Stevens family was meant, but he desired to learn more, if possible.

The trail was dark and gloomy, owing to the dense shade cast by thickly-growing trees, that intercepted the moon's rays. But after a few moments, Fred heard the Indians pause and seat themselves at only a few yards from the trail.

He glided nearer, until he could again hear their words. The same person was speaking that he had heard before.

"We will wait here for Long Hair. It will not be long before he comes."

"Where is Bob-tailed Horse?" asked another of the party.

"Gone to the lodge by the great rock. He will open the doors for us that we may strike without being hurt. He is to pretend his leg is hurt, so that he can not walk to his lodge, and will ask to rest there. Then when the pale-faced fools sleep, he will open the doors and let us in."

"Good! there are five scalps for us!" exultantly uttered one of the savages.

"No—only four. One Eye says that the young squaw must go to his lodge, or he will not help us."

The other demurred a little at this, but he was overruled by his comrades. Fred clutched his rifle with fingers that itched to be at the throats of the plotting scoundrels; but he restrained himself, and then glided stealthily away, thus losing information that would have still further increased his anxiety, for a diabolical plan was commented upon, concerning his own family.

But the young settler had heard enough to set him half wild. He knew that the maiden whom he loved, was in great peril, and that thought, for the time, drove all other considerations away.

He understood the allusion to One Eye, the Indian name of Sloan Young, the half-breed, whose left eye had been destroyed in a drunken fight. And he, too, was the Long Hair mentioned. Fred knew that the villain had been prowling around the cabin quite frequently of late, though the thought of his daring to look upon Jennie in such a light, never once occurred to him, before this.

The one called Bob-tailed Horse, Fred also knew by reputation, as being a reckless, unscrupulous rascal, drunken and worthless, unless in

just some such manner as the one hinted at. But this plan he would foil, at all hazards.

So when once safely beyond ear-shot, Fred arose and dashed through the forest with nimble feet, but yet using a degree of caution, for since hearing the revelations of the plotters, he knew not where or when he might encounter deadly enemies.

In half an hour more, Wilson neared the cabin belonging to Wesley Stevens, and when almost at the door, he met John, who was just sallying out to visit the Wilsons. Fred drew him aside and quickly detailed what he had overheard.

The young man was greatly excited by these tidings, but managed to control his feelings, in a measure.

"Are you sure you heard those words? May there not be some mistake?" he asked, dubiously.

"I only wish there was—but I know better. Depend upon it, it is true. Is that Indian in the house?"

"Bob-tail? Yes. He came in not long ago, pretending to be lame, tired and hungry."

"You see! the very story I heard he was to tell! The dirty imp!" muttered Fred, angrily, while his blue eyes flashed ominously.

"What had we better do, anyhow?"

"First, I intend to settle with this devil; then we must decide further. I think, though, it would be best for the family to all go over to our house, and then if it is deemed best, we should try to reach the settlements below; we can all go together. It is on our road, you know, so there 'll be no time lost."

"I was just going over there—but if you—that is—" and handsome John hesitated and blushed in a very suspicious manner.

"I tell you what I think is best, John. You know your father must be told of it, and if you go to talking to him in secret, after having started away, Bob-tail may suspect something. It would look more natural if I did it. Don't you think so?" and Fred felt an inward conviction that he had presented his point very well.

"Yes, I do think so. So if you'll do that, I'll run on ahead and tell your folks what's in the wind. I'll have them all ready by the time you come. Don't lose any time, though," and then the two young men parted.

Fred was greeted at the door by Wesley Stevens, and bade enter, but he made an excuse and drew the old man outside. In a few words he revealed his discovery, adding:

"Now I will get to talking with Bob-tail, and then when I cough, do you take the fellow from behind. Don't be particular what you hit him with, just so you don't let him make much noise."

"Very well—I'll do my part," and then Stevens led the way into the house, where a rude lamp had been lighted by the blushing Jennie as soon as she heard the voice of the young borderer.

The greeting was cordial, but still somewhat constrained between the young couple, for the old folks were looking on, and they had not yet progressed so far along love's path as to be unreserved.

Fred bent an inquiring look upon the dusky figure crouching near the corner of the fireplace, where yet glowed a small fire; the rem-

nant of that necessary to prepare the evening meal. It was indeed "Bob-tailed Horse," who had consented to play such a vile part.

And he seemed pre-eminently fitted for such a duty, too. Low, squat-built, he was clothed in a dirty, greasy and tattered pair of trowsers and a calico shirt, with bare feet and head. His face was swollen and bloated with strong drink; his eyes bleared and bloodshot, from the same cause. On the whole, a more disgusting specimen of the "noble Lo!" could scarcely be found, even among his own people; and that is saying a good deal.

"How?" exclaimed Fred, as he stood before the savage, outstretching a hand.

The greeting was returned, and Bob-tail arose to clasp the hand. Then Fred, as if accidentally, worked around until he was between the Indian and his late position.

"Has 'Bob-tailed Horse' saw *Petit Corbeau* lately?" asked Wilson.

"No—long time—so many suns," and he raised both hands. "Little Crow call Injun drunk fool," and a venomous glitter filled the bleared eyes of the sot.

"You don't tell me so? Why he must have been drunk to have said that. You don't like fire-water, do you?"

"No—no like—*heap* bad! Ugh!" brazenly lied the rascal.

"Does my brother know where One Eye is?" suddenly asked Fred.

Bob-tail looked steadily at the young settler for a moment, and then slowly shook his head. Stevens drew nearer, whistling upon a heavy, half-bent ox bow of hickory.

"Let Bob-tailed Horse listen. I have a little story to tell him," slowly returned Fred, as his gaze met that of the Indian.

"A little bird told me that the Sioux were getting mad at their white brothers. That Bob-tailed Horse was one of them. That he had sworn he would take the scalp of a white man before another sun. Is this story true?"

The savage shifted his gaze and glanced swiftly around the room. Stevens still whistled on, idly whistling; the women sat gazing upon the—to them—incomprehensible scene, with strange emotion. Fred deliberately resumed:

"This bird also told me that Bob-tailed Horse would go to the cabin of a pale-face and ask for lodging and food, pretending he was weary and sick, so that he might open the door to One Eye and Dusky Dick, and let them enter to kill the whites without danger to themselves. Did the little bird tell me true?"

The Indian stood motionless as if carved from stone, save that one hand slowly glided up toward his belt, where hung a knife and hatchet. Then Wilson coughed.

Stevens sprang forward with uplifted ox-bow, and ere the fated red-skin could stir a step, the heavy club descended upon his head with crushing force. He tottered feebly, and then fell forward into Fred's arms, who allowed the senseless form to fall to the floor.

Both women uttered a little cry of wondering alarm at this sudden and unexpected move, but then a gesture from Stevens checked all further outcry.

"Hush!" he cried, sternly; "don't make any

noise, for your lives! Shut the door, Jennie, quick. There may be others of the devils prowling around. Fred's story was a true one. This carrion was a spy, who intended giving us up to his friends to-night."

Fred stooped over the stricken Indian, and carefully examined the wound. He found that, though senseless, the rascal still lived; his skull had not been fractured, though the blow seemed enough to have killed an ox.

"What shall we do with him, Stevens?" he asked, doubtfully.

"Dead men tell no tales!" sternly responded the old settler, a deadly glitter in his black eyes.

"No—no, do not kill him, husband!" cried the wife, springing forward, as he raised aloft the blood-stained ox-bow.

"It is him or us, Mary," but the uplifted arm slowly sunk. "He would have killed us all, after eating our food!"

"Tie him and put him down the pit," suggested Jennie.

"It will do, Stevens," said Wilson. "They will find we suspect their plans, anyhow, when they find we are gone. It would only make them hotter after us, if we killed him."

"You may be right, Fred, but the dog is not fit to live. However, have it your own way."

A strong cord was quickly produced, and with it the rascal was bound hand and foot. Then a gag was forced between his jaws; after which a trap-door was lifted and the Indian cast rudely down into a pit, where were stored a few vegetables.

"Now what next?"

"You had better pack up such things as you must have, and such as we can carry; come with me to our house. John has told them all by this time, and they will be ready for a move. I don't think we will be safe out here as long as those two devils are at large, with their gang."

"But we must take the horses."

"No—I think best not. The rascals are somewhere between here and our house; and they would be sure to hear the sound of hoof-strokes, while on foot we can pass them without being noticed. If we think best, we can then take horses from our house. I don't think it would be safe now."

After some little demurring on the part of Stevens, who did not relish leaving his valuable stock, this plan was adopted.

In a very few minutes, the little party of four were laden with food and weapons, and then emerging from the cabin, they set out upon their perilous journey.

CHAPTER III.

DUSKY DICK'S FIRST BLOW.

JOHN STEVENS felt not a little concern as he strode along the grass-grown trail that Fred Wilson had so lately traversed. The discovery made by the latter was truly a momentous one, and if true, the danger impending was one that would require all their skill and courage to avert.

He thought of the gentle Annie being exposed to all the horrors of an Indian attack, and wild visions of daring deeds and heroic struggles in

her behalf flashed across his mind. He felt that he could accomplish all these, for *her* sake.

And, in good truth, these fancies possessed his mind so greatly that he forgot a greater portion of necessary prudence, striding along as if in the utmost security, as though fully assured that there was not an enemy within a hundred miles of his present location. But he was speedily awakened from his abstraction.

A dark form suddenly sprung out before him, with leveled rifle-muzzle threatening him. As his eyes fell upon the intruder, John fancied he recognized the figure.

"Is that you, Dusky Dick?" he called out, halting and half-raising his rifle.

"Keep your gun down—don't offer to shoot, or I'll plug ye! Yes, it's me. But who the devil are *you*?" returned the man.

"Stevens—John Stevens, you know," laughed the young settler. "Why, who'd you take me for?"

"Fer a Injun. They're 'round at thar tricks, I b'lieve. But whar are you goin'?"

"Over to Wilson's—why?"

"Oh, nothin'—I didn't know. Folks all well at home?"

"Yes, all well; that is, all of our own. But there is a lame Indian there, who hurt himself somehow, while out hunting, I believe. You know him—Bob-tailed Horse?" added John, the better to allay any suspicions the other might have entertained.

"Yes; a drunken dog. Mind out or he'll sarve you some dirty trick, yet. Wal, if you're goin' to Wilson's, I won't hinder you no more. Jest give them my respects, will you?" and Dusky Dick stepped to one side of the path.

But, as he did so, John noted an evil glitter in his eyes as the moonlight fell upon the renegade's countenance, through a rift in the tree-tops. Stevens realized that Dusky Dick meant mischief.

"All right—I'll tell 'em," and the young settler strode lightly past the man.

He saw the heavy rifle of the desperado raise and sweep through the air, wielded by strong arms, evidently aimed at his head. But Stevens ducked adroitly, and the weapon, hissed harmlessly above his head, the force of the unresisted blow swinging Dusky Dick around almost against him.

With an angry cry, Stevens whirled his rifle around, its iron barrel alighting full upon the traitor's head, felling him to the ground like a dead man. But still a little cry broke from his lips.

Instantly all around was confusion, and the young settler shuddered involuntarily at the terrible commotion he had aroused. Wild yells filled the air until it sounded as though scores of devils had broken loose upon earth, all thirsting for human blood.

Stevens knew his danger, and realized the full extent of his peril—that he had fallen into an ambush of red-skins of whom Dusky Dick was either a member, or else a chief. And he knew too that he would be put to his best, if he escaped the threatened capture.

He had not alone to think of himself, either. The fate of more than one probably depended upon the speedy accomplishment of his errand.

He must warn the Wilson family of their danger.

Uttering a low cry, John crouched down, and, summoning all his powers, sprung with headlong force along the path, that he could see now contained one or more of his enemies. But it was the only road for him now.

He leaped forcibly against the foremost Indian, hurling him breathless to the ground, without receiving any particular harm himself. But there another confronted him, with uplifted hatchet gleaming in the moonlight, only a few feet distant.

John lowered his rifle and sprung forward, at the same time thrusting out forcibly with his weapon. The rifle-muzzle took the red-skin full in the pit of his stomach, doubling him up like a jack-knife, and causing him to emit a fearful grunt; but at the same time he clutched the rifle-barrel and held it with a firm grip. This, added to the impetus of his rush, caused Stevens to stumble headlong, and ere he could recover himself, several red-skins were upon him.

Literally so in this case, and the young settler was borne struggling to the ground, almost smothered by the weight of the yelling red-skins. And then their weapons flashed out and were uplifted to drink his heart's blood.

It seemed as if the young man's fate was irretrievably sealed, and his eyes closed as a faint prayer rose to his lips. But his time was not yet.

Dusky Dick recovered his feet and sprung forward, his head dizzy and confused by the blow he had received. But he knew enough to see the peril of the young settler, and—for a purpose of his own—resolved to avert it, for the present.

"Hold! don't strike!" he commanded, in the Sioux dialect. "You must not kill him yet."

It is not likely that his words would have had the desired effect, had he not beaten the weapons aside with his rifle-barrel, and fairly hurled one or two of the savages aside.

Dusky Dick fiercely declared that the man who lifted a hand against Stevens, unless by his express orders, should die the death of a dog. This threat, when uttered by one possessing the renegade's resolution, sufficed; and then by his orders, the young settler was firmly bound.

Dusky Dick drew aside with several of the principal braves, and consulted earnestly for a few moments; then he returned, and Stevens was lifted erect. Two savages held him firmly, while another loosened the bonds that confined his feet, so that he could walk, but not run.

"What do you intend doing, Dusky Dick?" he demanded, in a tone as calm as he could make it, while such angry passions struggled within his breast; "what do you mean by this outrage?"

"I told you the Injuns was on the war-path. Now you know it, don't ye?" chuckled the renegade, triumphantly.

"What're you going to do with *me*?" persisted John.

"Keep you prisoner fer awhile; then burn you, maybe. You must ask Sloan Young. You are *his* game."

John saw the uselessness of further speech, and remained silent. He realized that he was in

a truly perilous situation, and though he felt some natural uneasiness for himself, by far the greater share of his anxiety was for the peril that threatened Annie.

If Dusky Dick would act thus toward him, might he not do the same with others? Stevens shuddered convulsively as he realized the peril that threatened the family of his loved one, who were, as he believed, totally unsuspecting of the outbreak.

And then his fears were confirmed by the direction taken by his captors, they heading directly toward the point where the Wilson cabin was located. As if to put the matter entirely beyond doubt, Dusky Dick, after a few instructions to the leading red-skin, fell back to a position just in front of Stevens—the entire party proceeding in Indian file, as the narrow trail would not admit two abreast—and tauntingly uttered:

"As you said you was goin' on to Wilson's, I thought I'd give you a escort, like. Don't you feel highly honored? You hed ought, anyhow," and he chuckled grimly.

"You are not—" faltered John, his blood chilling at the significant tone of the renegade.

"Ain't I? but I *am*, too. Thought you'd be lonely, a capt'v by yourself, so we've concluded to give you comp'ny. But don't count on *too* much. Annie's fer *me*!"

John uttered a hoarse growl of anger, and would have sprung upon his tormentor, bound though his hands were, had not the guard behind him divined his intentions and drew him forcibly back. This showed Stevens the folly of allowing his passions to get the better of him, and so he kept silence, while Dusky Dick malignantly resumed:

"Yas, Annie's *mine*. That's settled, for good. She'll make a nice squaw—don't you think so? Anyhow, I'm goin' to risk it. But t'others—well, they'll prob'ly git jest the same as *you* will—'ither knocked on the head decently, or else used fer a bonfire.

"But you don't talk. Deaf, ain't ye? Or be you thinkin' o' the folks at home? Need it, *they* do. You said Bob-tailed Horse was there, didn't you? Well, he was *sent* there; and, what's more, he was sent thar by Sloan Young, and he ain't hurt no more'n *you* be, not a bit! He was sent thar to open the door at the right time, so 't the reds could walk in quietly. It's nearly time fer the blow, too, as your folks go to bed airly. I wonder how they'll feel by mornin'?" And Dusky Dick laughed ferociously.

Stevens shuddered, but did not reply. He knew that Bob-tailed Horse would scarcely admit his red brethren, but then there was other danger. He knew that Fred would try and persuade the family to hasten over to his house, and he—John—had had evidence that the trail was thickly beset by dangers.

Besides the band that held him a captive, Stevens had heard enough to know that Sloan Young was also lying near at hand, only awaiting the proper time to spring his trap upon the "people of the great rock." Might not Fred also stumble upon one of these parties?

Dusky Dick was not a little provoked at the ill-success of his taunting boasts, but soon de-

sisted, and once more made his way to the front, as the party were now rapidly nearing the cabin of Edward Wilson.

John was not idle, however. He resolved to escape, if it lay in human power, as he felt that to remain captive was equivalent to death, more or less speedy; and he might yet be able to accomplish something. If too late to save the Wilson family, he might be of use to his own people.

He worked assiduously upon the bonds that confined his hands. They were of tanned buckskin, and defied his utmost efforts to break them.

The knots appeared to be tied securely, and would neither slip nor come untied. It seemed as though his hopes were doomed to be frustrated by this one fact. And yet he did not give way to despair or cease his efforts, only keeping them concealed—as he was enabled to do by the darkness beneath the trees—from the red-skins before and behind him.

Now the little party stood upon the verge of the clearing surrounding the cabin of Edward Wilson, and peered curiously out upon it. An Indian grasped John firmly by the neck, and rested one hand upon his lips, evidently resolved that he should give no alarm.

All was quiet around the dwelling. There was no light within the building, and it seemed as though the inmates had retired to rest, with their usual feeling of security. Dusky Dick uttered a fiendish laugh.

"You see," he muttered in John's ear, "your friends don't expect visitors to-night. They will be agreeably surprised—I guess *not*—when we wake them up. But, still, it *may* be a trap, and *you* must guard us from it. Now I am goin' to make you walk jest afore me, and, mind you, I have a long knife—long enough, anyhow, to reach your *heart*—ready for use at the slightest sound from your lips. And *I will use it*, too, if you give a single word or sign to alarm them."

In a few words Dusky Dick made known his plans to his followers, and they expressed approval of it. John was brought to the front and Dusky Dick crouched behind him. Then the others strung out in a row, so that any shot from the house would miss them all, unless first striking the young settler.

"Now, step out, young feller," muttered Dusky Dick, pricking Stevens slightly with the point of his bared knife, "and remember that if you rouse them up, their first shot must take *you*. Pleasant, ain't it?" And he again gave vent to a fiendish laugh.

John dared not remonstrate, and obeyed the impulse given him by the renegade, slowly advancing toward the log-cabin. Nearly two hundred yards of clearing had to be traversed, and as may be imagined, it was a trying ordeal for the young man's nerves, who knew not at what moment a shot from his friends might sound his death-knell.

But in this he was agreeably disappointed, for the side of the cabin was gained in safety. Not a sound broke the stillness that filled the clearing, save the usual hum and chirping of the summer insects.

Dusky Dick advanced to the door and gently

rapped with his knuckles. No answer; only the echo of the knock replied. Again and again he repeated it, with the same result.

A glad hope sprung up in the heart of the young settler. He believed that the family had taken alarm and sought safety in flight.

The same idea struck Dusky Dick, and he thumped loudly upon the door. Then with a wild, angry cry he rushed forcibly against it. Still no answering sound broke the silence.

"The birds have flown!" uttered a savage, in a tone of disgust.

"Break down the door and let's see," cried Dusky Dick, with a bitter oath.

A simultaneous rush of several sturdy forms, broke down the fastenings of the door, and then Dusky Dick rushed into the house. He could hear no signs of its being occupied, and then hastily struck a light. As the glare filled the room, an angry roar broke from his lips.

The floor was strewn with various articles, whose disorder told of great haste; that told the renegade his anticipated victims had indeed taken the alarm and had fled from the impending peril. Now he bitterly cursed his folly in leaving the building unguarded, after his vain attempt at compromise.

"Git torches and hunt fer sign," he cried, as he stirred up the embers that still glowed in the huge fireplace. "They can't have gone far in this little time. Quick! we will find them yet!"

In a few moments a number of the Indians had secured torches, and were searching the ground without for some trace to tell them the direction taken by the fugitives. Meanwhile Dusky Dick had hastily searched through the building, and confirmed this belief. They were indeed gone.

CHAPTER IV.

A TERRIBLE SURPRISE.

TOBE CASTOR sat down to the table and without ceremony began what he would have termed a "square meal," eating as though his whimsical assertion was true—that he had not eaten a bite for two weeks.

Edward Wilson conversed earnestly with his wife and daughter, telling the tidings imparted by their friend, the old hunter. He asked their advice, for, like a sensible man, he did not think it derogatory to his manhood, to consult one of the "weaker sex."

"What does Tobe say?" asked Mrs. Wilson.

"He says thet you hed better jest git up an' git, while you kin," replied that worthy, as emphatically as the crowded state of his mouth would admit. "They've got a dead open, an' shet on ye, 's long's you stay hyar. Dusky Dick wouldn't 'a' shot off his mouth thet-a-way, unless he had some one nigh to back him up. An' I *know* the pesky imps hez riz, down funder; an' it stands to reason that it'll spread up this-a-way, whar thar's a few skelps to be got, 'thout much resk. So I say—*mosey!*"

"But where—which way? If, as you say, the Indians have broken out below us, they must be between here and the settlements—at least such as are strong enough to offer any hope of safety."

"Jest so, Ed; but see. The longer you wait

the wusser it'll be. An' it'll keep a-spreadin', natur'ly, up this-a-way. Ef you start now, you stand a chaine o' gittin' through. Ef you wait ontill to-morrer—providin' Dusky Dick don't put in his oar, afore—it'll be wuss, a heap. Dog-on it! You *must* start to-night!" earnestly added Castor.

"But Fred—he is not here, and we can't leave him."

"No more shall you. My plan's t'his. Say we get out o' here, an' a'terwards Dusky Dick gives the cabin a call, an' finds us gone. Won't he natur'ly s'pose you've struck out for the settlements? An' won't he look fer us in that direction? In *course* he will. So much fer so much, then."

"We'll take the hosses an' start in that d'rection fu'st. Fer it's more'n likely they'll hunt fer our trail by torchlight, ontill they set the p'int we head torst. Then they'll set off to run us down. So we must go fur enough on critter-back to fool 'em, *thet* way. Then we'll turn 'round an' strike back in a crooked route, torst the Stevens shanty, find Fred, tell our yarn, an' take the hull caboodle with us."

"We kin take a turn ag'in, an' then by hard ridin', make up fer lost time. Ef we're ahead o' those imps by day, then we're all right fer *them*. We must take the chances 'bout t'others. But I think we kin work it. Thar—that's my plan; what d' you think o' it, anyhow?" demanded Castor, arising from the table.

The party were silent. They could see no other way, and yet this one seemed full of danger. But indeed, if the rising of the Indians in insurrection was a fact, which way could they turn without incurring danger?

So this plan was finally acquiesced to, and the work of preparation for flight commenced. Castor and Wilson set about saddling the horses, while the women packed food and extra clothing, with such little articles of value that they could not bring themselves to abandon, in small and compact bundles.

They worked as if for dear life, and but a few minutes were consumed ere all was pronounced ready for a start. Castor had taken a hurried scout along the route they proposed to follow, and discovered nothing suspicious.

There were only four horses, but Tobe scornfully declared that he would ride none of them; that he never yet met the four-footed animal that he could not wear out, on foot. But he advised them to take the extra one along for Fred's use.

Then after a few words of caution, he led the way from the clearing, and they entered the gloomy forest, leaving the home that had sheltered them for two years, with sensations of choking regret.

The trail was narrow and winding, and frequently the riders were forced to stoop low down in their saddles, to avoid the pendent boughs, but to offset this, they had the advantage of knowing the route thoroughly, from so often traversing it. Tobe Castor led the way with long, swinging strides, that forced the horses to their best walking, to avoid being distanced.

"We've gone fur a plenty," said Tobe, when nearly a half-mile had been traversed, "We

must strike fer the other shanty now, or we mought miss Fred. Take keer fer your heads, now, as thar hain't any trail the way we must go."

"Ain't you afraid of losing the way, Tobe? It's so dark," muttered Wilson.

"Nary time I ain't. Lose nothin'! Me? *Git* out! Wasn't I raised in the woods? Couldn't I smell my way, even ef I was blinded? In *course* I kin. Don't be skeered 'bout thet. Ned I'll take you as straight thar as a drunken Injun's trail—fer you know we've got to go mighty crooked through the dark, on this bresh. Now keep cluss together and don't make no n'ise. Don't holler out, even ef the limbs saws your heads off. 'Tain't nothin'—a'ter you git used to it."

The guide hurried abruptly to his left, and strode rapidly along, holding onto the bridle of the horse ridden by Mrs. Wilson. After her came Annie, with Wilson bringing up the rear, leading the spare horse.

Owing to the darkness, considerable noise was unavoidably made, but as they soon gained a point at a fair distance from the trail, Castor believed there was but little danger of being overhead.

Thus he pressed on through the woods at a good pace, for now time was precious. A long road lay before them, and unless a certain distance could be gained before day-dawn, he believed their chances of ultimate escape would be faint indeed.

The riders found that his warning was well founded, for more than once they were almost brushed from their saddles, by the low-hanging boughs, and only by lying almost flat along their horses' necks, could they proceed with any degree of safety.

For several miles the fugitives proceeded in this manner, which was inexpressibly wearisome, and more than once had Wilson urged Castor to seek the trail leading direct to the cabin of Wesley Stevens. But the guide refused, as it would be incurring foolish risk. The unbroken woods were far safer in his estimation.

But their journey was not to be completed without interruption, and one soon came that threatened serious consequences. It occurred in this manner.

As they were proceeding at a fair gait, a bright flash spouted forth from one side of the little party, at only a few yards' distance, and mingled with the sharp report came the spiteful *hum* of a ragged bullet as it hurtled close to the head of Mrs. Wilson. Then a loud, fierce yell broke upon their hearing.

The horses were badly frightened by these sudden and unexpected sounds, and broke loose from all control, wildly plunging on through the woods. And the voice of Castor was heard, crying:

"Keep together, an' let the animiles went! Foller me!"

Fleet-footed as a deer, he sprung forward and clutched the bridle-rein that had been wrenched from his grasp; then ran beside the horse, now leading the way. Occasionally he would raise his voice—knowing that, if they were indeed followed, this could not add to their peril, as the loud crashing made by the affrighted animals

could be heard further than his cries—and it was essential that none of the party should become separated from the others.

For nearly a mile this headlong race was maintained, and then Castor suddenly checked the horse he was guiding. He could hear nothing of any pursuer, and had resolved that now, if ever, was the time to throw any such off the scent.

"Is it all right, Ed?" he anxiously cried, approaching Wilson.

"Yes, I believe so. Is Mary hurt?"

"No, I am safe. But Annie—where is she?" replied Mrs. Wilson, breathlessly.

"Here; I caught her horse as it ran past. Are you hurt, Annie?"

There came no answer, and Wilson repeated the inquiry, in wondering alarm. Tobe Castor sprung forward with a cry, and stood beside the horse.

It was dark and gloomy there, in the forest depths, where the thickly-crested tree-tops effectually prevented the moon's rays from falling on the earth, and nothing could be seen. The sense of feeling must be depended upon merely.

Castor reached out and touched the snorting horse. It trembled like a leaf. He called aloud on Annie's name, but she did not answer.

His hands fell upon the saddle. *It was empty—Annie was gone!*

The old scout uttered a low cry and staggered back. The blow was a fearful one, and he felt it as though the lost one had been his own child.

"My God! Castor, what is it?" gasped Wilson, alarmed at the tone of the hunter, and bending forward in the saddle as though he would pierce the dense obscurity with his distended eyeballs.

"The gal is gone!"

Mrs. Wilson uttered a low, gasping groan, and reeled in her seat. Tobe sprung forward and caught her sinking form, lowering her gently to the ground. In a moment Wilson was beside her, half-distracted by the terrible events that pressed so closely upon them.

"Give her a sup o' this," gloomily said Castor, producing a small flask of whisky. "'Tain't no time fer faintin' now. We've got our hands full 'thout thet."

"What must we—what *can* we do?" cried the father, chokingly, as he strove to revive the fainting woman.

"*Work—work* like blazes. No use goin' further until we find thet gal; ef it kin be did. *Ef*—it *must* be did! Thunder! I'll find her ef I hev to take an' rip the hull teetotal kentry through my old hat! See 'f don't, now," and Castor spoke with strong emphasis.

Mrs. Wilson now gave signs of returning consciousness. Strong-nerved, she was not one to yield long to any misfortune, however heavy and bitter it might be.

"Now, Ed," added Tobe, thoughtfully, "this is what we must do. You may stay here with her an' the hosses, 'ca'se we may need them afore long. I'll go back 'long the trail as we kem by, an' look for the gal. She must 'a' bin knocked off by some pesky limb, an' won't hev gone fur. I'll find her, never fear."

"But the Indians—those who fired at us? They may have found her," faltered Wilson.

"'Tain't likely, fer I didn't hear thar yell as

they'd 'a' give ef they hed. I don't think they'd notice her tumble a-tall. An' then ag'in, I don't think thar was more'n one or two, or they'd 'a' follered us closter. Most likely jest a stray, prowlin' critter, who run jest as soon's he shot at us."

"I hope so—but why can't we all go?"

"Don't be a fool, now, Ed, *don't*. S'posin' thar *was* a wheen o' reds nigh, wouldn't we look nice a-blunderin' right spang into 'em? They'd hear us a-comin', an' then lay fer us. Then whar'd we be? No, *sir*. Whatever's did I must do alone by myself. You must stay here to keep *her* comp'ny—onless, indeed, you keep right on to the shanty fer Fred. Which is it?"

"No, we must not leave Annie—Fred is a man, and better able to take care of himself. We will wait here."

"All right, then. But fu'st, wait until I find a better place fer ye to lay low in than this," and Castor started away from the spot.

"Is Annie gone, Edward?" murmured Mrs. Wilson, feebly.

"Yes—but Tobe says he can find her. She is safe, I believe, but was brushed off the horse's back. He will find her, never fear."

"Here ye be, folks," muttered the old hunter, as he returned. "Kin you walk a leetle, Mary?"

"Yes, I can; I think."

"Holp her, Ed, while I take the animiles. Foller me."

In a few moments the refuge was gained; a sort of natural bower, where, even by the light of day, a casual observer would scarcely have noticed their presence, and in the darkness, unless some noise should betray them, an entire tribe of red-skins might have passed within arm's-length of the covert, without suspecting their presence.

"You stay here an' keep still. Don't move or speak 'bove a cat's whisper, until I come back. I'll give the call o' the night-hawk twicet. You know it, Ed?"

"Yes, but be—"

Tobe did not wait to hear the conclusion of this sentence, but turned and glided away. His mind was far from being at ease, although he had endeavored to cheer up the fugitives with a confidence he was far from possessing, as he knew that it was no time for despondency.

He knew that Annie had most likely been knocked from the saddle by a limb, and that she might have received such injuries as prevented her crying out. And then again she might have suddenly been pounced upon by the one who had fired the treacherous shot, and taken prisoner before she could give the alarm.

If hurt, the chances were against his finding her, in the darkness, and to await the light of day would be perilous in the extreme, now that the vicinity of deadly enemies was put beyond a doubt. Still he did not entirely despair; it was not his nature to do so, while breath remained.

Tobe glided along cautiously, seeming to avoid collision with the thickly-growing tree-trunks and bushes by instinct, keeping as near as he could tell, in the track of their wild flight. His hearing was keenly alert, and he looked for some signs or sounds to tell him whether the hidden horseman had followed them or not.

But he reached a point near where the alarm

had been given the horses, without seeing or hearing ought to confirm either his suspicions or hopes. Then he paused to listen more intently.

His lips compressed tightly and one hand sought the haft of his ready knife, as he heard the sound of faint footfalls, apparently approaching him. Still he did not speak or move, not knowing whether friend or foe advanced.

The steps sounded more and more distinct, until Tobe felt assured that the comer was not the girl he sought; the tread was too regular and deliberate for that of a frightened wanderer. Then who could it be but a foe?

A dark form appeared outlined against the less opaque atmosphere, within a few feet of the crouching scout. With knife drawn, Castor reached out, and finding a small twig, snapped it with a sharp noise.

A low guttural exclamation came from the figure, and it started back as if in alarm. That satisfied Castor, who sprung forward with a low howl of anger.

His arms closed around a brawny form, but a quick motion rendered the knife-stroke futile, and then they fell to the ground together, battling fiercely for the mastery. Their arms were twined around each other, so that their knives were of little use.

It was now a struggle for life or death!

CHAPTER V.

THE BURNING CABIN.

A DIM, shadowy, phantom-like chain flitting silently through the forest depths. A living chain, composed of human beings—at least in outward semblance—bent upon an errand of bloodshed and death.

They pause at the edge of a considerable clearing, and gaze out upon it. A rude log cabin stands here at the foot of a good-sized hill. In the darkness, it seems as though there were two buildings, but one is a huge square boulder. A mass of rock that has puzzled many to tell where it came from. It gives a name to the cabin and its owners, "the people of the lodge by the great rock."

The cabin is the one where we met the Stevens family. The human chain is led by One Eye—Sloan Young, the half-breed heretofore alluded to. He and his comrades have come here to perform their part of the bloody plan, to further which the Indian, Bob-tailed Horse, had been sent to gain admittance into the cabin.

"It is nearly time," muttered One Eye, in the Sioux dialect.

"Yes, the pale-faces are asleep before now," added one of the Indians.

"We will not wait any longer. Come, let us go," and One Eye entered the clearing and glided stealthily toward the cabin that stood silent and gloomy in the shadow of the hill.

The half-breed paused when beside the rude structure and uttered a call; one common to that place and time of year—the cry of the night-hawk. Then he stepped forward and pressed gently against the door.

To his surprise it did not yield. He again uttered the signal, upon which the traitor was to throw wide the door, but still without the desired result.

"The fool has drank fire-water until his brain

is asleep! He has forgotten his duty," angrily hissed the half-breed.

"It is growing late and our weapons are hungry for white blood. Let us break open the lodge. They can do nothing," muttered the Indian who had spoken before, who was evidently of higher rank than the others who stood silently behind him.

"We can do it. One rush will overpower them. But remember—the young squaw must not be harmed. She is *mine*," earnestly added Young.

"It is well. One Eye shall have her," and then the chief spoke a few words to his followers, who drew together and made a heavy rush against the door.

It flew open so suddenly that one-half their number fell in a sprawling heap upon the floor, half-way across the room. Then with wild yells and cries Young and the chief sprung over their forms, and glared around for their anticipated victims.

But where were they? Why did not their cries of wild alarm and terror break forth upon the air? Surely there had been noise enough made to awaken them from the soundest slumber!

Raging furiously, Young rushed into the second room, but silence met him there, as well. He could no longer doubt the truth.

"A light—quick!" he snarled fiercely, in his rage speaking in English. "They can't all be gone. Cusses on that drunken fool!"

A light was speedily struck, and applied to a heap of clothing that lay upon the floor. As the blaze shot up, the interior of the lodge was rendered visible. Here, as at a magic, the disordered furniture and various articles strewn about the floor, told of a hasty and recent flight.

The half-breed quickly ran through the rooms, and found nothing there to wreak his fury upon. The loft, likewise, was empty. His anger and disappointment were fearful.

Led by him the Indians procured lights and ran outside to find, if possible, some trace of the fugitives. While some searched for a trail, others sought among the brush and hollows along the hillside, in the faint hope that the fugitives had sought shelter there.

A faint ruddy glow now appeared upon the sky in the southeast, growing momentarily more vivid and clear. One of the Indians pointed it out to Sloan Young, who replied with a diabolical grin:

"It is the work of Dusky Dick. He has had better fortune than we."

Then as if this had reminded him of it, the renegade ran to the building and stirred up the dying fire, piling on clothes, bed-ticks, furniture and every thing movable, that would burn. Then he retreated once more, uttering a fiendish yell of delight.

Soon the flames burst through the open doorway, roaring and crackling as though in high glee at thus being turned loose to work its will. A torch was applied to the straw-thatched stables, and then as the affrighted stock ran lowing or neighing around their corrals, the dusky demons shot them down, uttering wild yells of diabolical exultation.

But the half-breed and his chief glided around,

striving to decipher the meaning of the many tracks that covered the ground. They were moving toward the forest, where their own party had not so defaced the ground with their trampling to and fro, when an unexpected sound startled them.

It was a cry, long and unearthly, seeming like, yet unlike a human voice. But if indeed one, then it must proceed from some person either in agonizing pain or mortal terror.

Again and again it came to their ears, with increasing distinctness, and even more startling than at first. And the dusky crowd glanced at each other in mute alarm.

The chief was scarcely less impressed, but Sloan Young did not exhibit the same symptoms. His face was eagerly turned toward the blazing cabin, through whose roof the flames were now ascending. Then as another yell broke upon his hearing, he said:

"It is from the lodge! The pale-faces have hidden beneath it, and are being *roasted alive!*"

The terror of the savages quickly gave place to emotions of anger, at thus being cheated out of the coveted scalps. The heat was now too intense for them to accomplish anything in the way of releasing the sufferers.

Then they started back with cries of wondering dismay. A shrill shriek of fearful torture rung out, and then a figure sprung from the fiery furnace and darted toward them; its arms flung wildly aloft, its garments dropped in charred fragments from its limbs.

Then with another long-drawn cry it sunk to the ground, almost at the feet of Sloan Young. The half-breed bent over it, but shrunk back at the horrible stench of burning flesh that arose from the body. Still he had recognized the unfortunate, burned and disfigured thought was.

"It is Bob-tailed Horse!" he exclaimed, turning to the chief.

And such was the case. He had been cast down the pit bound and gagged, as detailed, but soon recovered his senses. There he lay until he heard the angry voices of his confederates above him, and heard himself blamed for the disappointment.

He strove to cry out, but the gag had been firmly applied and his limbs were useless. In striving to free himself, he rolled over upon his face.

Then he heard the ominous crackling above him, and the pungent smoke that soon came to his nostrils told him of a new and fearful peril. And yet he was helpless to avert it. His bonds would not give, nor could he utter even a groan.

The heat increased, until the sweat streamed from every pore. The air became so close and hot that he nearly suffocated.

His prison became lighter, and he knew that the floor was being burned through. And still he struggled to burst his bonds—strove in vain. The skin cracked and shriveled up beneath the intense heat, and his tortures were excruciating.

The floor above him was one mass of coals. Then cinders fell upon his bare neck, hot and glowing. He shook his head, but the coals adhered to the hissing flesh.

Another and another fell, until his body was literally covered with the blazing sparks. Either the cords had been weakened by fire, or else the torturing coals had given Bob-tailed Horse a fictitious strength, for with one mighty effort he burst them asunder, and snatching the gag from his mouth, uttered a wild cry for help.

He sprung upward, and caught at one of the glowing sleepers. It broke beneath his weight, and he fell back, covered with the hotly-blazing debris. Again he sprung to his feet and essayed to gain the level floor; and again he fell back, screeching—dying.

More of the floor crumbled away, and then he sprung upon the edge of the narrow pit. With yet another cry, he fell forward upon his face in the glowing mass of coals.

He tottered to his feet and rushed blindly forward, sinking nearly knee-deep in the burning embers. He ran against the still standing logs and staggered back; his eyesight was gone.

But he did not fall, and sprung ahead once more. This time he emerged from the doorway, and then with a gasping yell he fell to the ground.

And yet, after all this torture, he still lived.

He knew he was among friends, and cried out for water. More from his gestures than aught else he was understood, and Young hastened to supply his wants. Not from motives of pity, but because he hoped to gain some valuable information from the dying wretch.

The spring was close by, and a hatful of cold water was brought the scarred and mangled sufferer. He drank it down eagerly and begged piteously for more.

"Tell me first," said One Eye, in the Sioux dialect, "where are the pale-faces?"

"Gone—water—water!" gasped the wretch.

"Where?" sternly cried Young. "Tell me all, or you shall perish for want of a drop of water. Tell me, and you shall have all you wish."

"Gone to—over there," was the husky reply.

"To Wilson's?" asked Young, in English.

"Yes—young brave tell 'um—they go—run 'way—"

One Eye sprung to his feet with a peculiar cry. He had learned all he wished.

"Water—water!" gasped the sufferer, but his plea was unheeded.

He could be of no further service to them. He might die a dog's death, as he had lived a dog's life. What cared they?

"Come—there is no time to lose. We must hasten or they will escape us yet. Follow me, and their scalps shall hang at our girdles before another sun!" yelled One Eye, as he dashed away from the burning cabin, closely followed by the savages, leaving the dying wretch as he lay, to gasp out his feeble remnant of life in fruitless appeals for water!

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

As Dusky Dick turned from the loft, after his fruitless search, a loud, shrill yell from one of his braves without, told him that the trail had been found. He uttered a little cry of exultation

and flung his blazing brand upon the bed, as he dashed out of doors.

The trail-hunters had found where the beasts had been mounted, and then from that point the tracks led in a straight line toward the forest. There seemed but one solution of this. The settler had taken alarm at the threats of Dusky Dick, and had resolved to journey to the lower settlements.

"Look! the lodge is burning!" exclaimed a savage, to Dusky Dick.

The brand the latter had thoughtlessly flung upon the bed had done its work. The flames were shooting up, leaping hither and thither, roaring and crackling as if in fiendish glee.

"Let it burn. It will shelter no more of our enemies," and he turned away with a grim smile.

John Stevens was standing near, under guard of two brawny braves, who kept a vigilant watch over him. His blood was boiling within him at this last act of wanton malignancy, but fortunately he controlled his anger before it broke forth into words, that, while they could do him no good, might be productive of harm, in the wrathful mood of his captors.

Dusky Dick now renewed his instructions to the guards to keep careful watch over the captive, and then set forward after such of his braves as were tracing out the course of the fugitives by torchlight. The hoof-tracks crossed the clearing, and entered the trail leading to the lower settlements.

Thus far it was plain sailing, and Dusky Dick thought he divined the plans of the fugitives. He believed they were pressing on at a hot pace for the safe country below, and resolved to give them chase.

He could not proceed rapidly enough by torchlight trailing, and indeed, knowing the lay of the country so well, he did not think there was any further need of this aid. On foot he could proceed much more rapidly than the fugitives upon horseback, through the tangled woods.

But it would be impossible to carry his prisoner along. There would be too great a risk of losing him, and besides, he would only delay them.

So Dusky Dick turned to the two guards and bade them take Stevens and hasten at once to the lodge by the great rock, where they were to deliver him to Sloan Young, according to the bargain already made. Then he and his braves dashed away at headlong speed along the trace.

Ever since his capture, John had been busy. He knew that unless he could effect his escape that night, his chances for life were very slim.

His hands had been bound behind him with strong deer-skin thongs. Then another cord had been wound several times around his body, thus pinioning his arms close to his sides. It seemed as though escape from these bonds, unaided, was an impossibility.

John had thoroughly tested the strength of the thong securing his wrists, and knew that he could not break it while his arms were so confined that he could not exert his strength to any advantage. He saw that he must first rid himself of the cords around his arms and body.

And to this end he had been working since before the cabin was reached. While the search

was being prosecuted, he had been backed up against the building's side by his captors. Here he had caught one of the cords upon a knot, and had succeeded in pulling it down over his hands; thus the most difficult part of the task was accomplished.

The rest was comparatively easy. The one turn, thus loosened, gradually divided its surplus with the others, until John could work his hands slightly up and down. When the party entered the woods, along the horse trail, only one cord bound his arms!

Then that slipped down, and during the consultation, John, with a quick, dextrous twist, brought his bound hands up over his head, and dropped them in front; the movement not being noticed in the gloom. Cautiously raising his hands, Stevens applied his strong, sharp teeth to the thongs, and though he had barely half a score moments to work in, he improved this time so well that the thong parted at a quick pull upon it.

His first impulse was to turn and flee for life, but that would be too great a risk, and the young settler had sufficient good sense to await a more favorable opportunity.

Then he was given to the two braves, to be conducted to the half-breed, One Eye. Stevens felt a thrill of delight at this, for he felt that his escape was all but assured. Surely, during the long three miles he could effect an escape, now that only two were left to guard him.

But a danger threatened him, that he had not foreseen. He was being led back to the blazing cabin, and once within the broad circle of light cast around it, it was highly probable one of the red-skins would notice that the cord was broken around his wrists.

However, that must be chanced, and as the young settler managed to screen the broken ends, holding them under his hands, again crossed behind his back, he believed they would pass muster. The clearing was entered, a red-skin walking upon either side of him, clutching a shoulder.

The building was now blazing furiously, and Stevens felt a choking sensation as he gazed upon it. Many a happy hour had he spent beneath that roof, with those who, for aught he knew to the contrary, might even then be lying cold and still in the embrace of death.

As the clearing was crossed, the cabin being left directly behind the trio, a low cry broke from John's lips. Before them, afar off, was a ruddy glow, lighting up the skies high above the tree-tops. It needed not a second glance to tell the young settler the meaning of this. The position plainly revealed that. It was the conflagration built by One Eye; the blazing of the second cabin.

The Indians urged John along rapidly. One walked before, the other behind, within arm's length of their prisoner. Evidently they did not intend throwing away a chance, but were resolved to convey him safely to his destination.

They had not proceeded far from the Wilson cabin, when the foremost Indian paused with a low hiss, and bent his ear toward the ground. To the right and front he could distinguish the tramp of horses' hoofs.

"Perhaps 'tis One Eye, crossing with horses captured from the people of the lodge by the great rock," muttered the savage, whose hand rested upon John's shoulder.

"It may be. Let Tichenet wait here with the pale-face, while Asamee goes to see," hastily muttered the other, arising and gliding away in the forest, choosing a course so as to intercept the horsemen, whoever they might be, leaving the other two where they stood.

John believed that the time had now come for him to make a bold stroke for freedom, assured that no other so good a chance would be given him. And so, while waiting for Asamee to gain a safe distance, he entirely freed his hands.

Stealing a glance at his guard, Stevens saw that one hand rested upon a knife-haft, while his head was bent in an attitude of acute attention. His thoughts were mainly with his comrade, and the probable issue of his venture.

Stevens tightly clinched his hand, and drew it back. Suddenly there came a startling interruption. A clear, spiteful crack echoed through the forest, slowly followed by a wild, shrill yell, unmistakably that of an Indian, probably that of Asamee, as the direction corresponded with the one taken by him.

Tichenet uttered a low cry, and, dropping his grasp from the prisoner's shoulder, he started forward a pace, his nostrils dilating like those of a hound upon a breast-high scent. The golden opportunity was offered, and John was not a man to neglect it.

His wiry right arm shot out, the tightly clinched fist alighted full beneath the red-skin's unguarded ear, felling him to the ground like a dog, the blood gushing from his mouth and nostrils. Stevens did not trust to this, but sprung upon the senseless form, and plucking the half-drawn knife from the nerveless grasp, he drove it deep down into the red-skin's broad breast.

Then John seized the fallen rifle, assuring himself it had received no injury; after which he secured the ammunition and belt, placing in it, when buckled around his waist, the knife and hatchet of his dead foe. He could scarcely restrain a cry of exultation, as he felt himself once more a free man, provided with means of offense or defense, as the occasion might require.

John paused and listened intently. He could hear no sounds save the usual ones of a summer night in the forest.

He knew that his friends were somewhere in the woods; the two blazing cabins told him that, but just where, he had no means of knowing. But he believed the party fired at by Asamee—if indeed it was his rifle they had heard—were none other than his relatives, under convoy of Fred Wilson, who had taken the horses and were hastening toward the cabin he had so lately left.

But surely they must have noted the glare of the blazing building, and it would tell them that foes were, or had lately been there. Then they would naturally give it a wide berth, which would account for their being off the main trail.

Still, John thought it strange he heard no further sounds. If they had fired at Asamee, why

did not that worthy return? His yell had come after the shot; neither was it a death-cry. That much Stevens felt confident of.

"John Stevens, you're a fool!" he disgustedly muttered, apostrophizing himself, after a brief hesitation. "If you want to find out, why don't you go where you can, instead of standing here like a simpleton?"

Acting upon this sensible advice, John turned and glided from the blood-stained trace into the forest, as nearly as he could guess, in a direct line toward the point from whence had proceeded the alarm. But the delay had somewhat confused him, and he bore considerably to the left.

He was forced to advance slowly, for fear of coming into unexpected collision with Asamee, and some little time was consumed ere he gained the vicinity—as he believed—of the spot. Then he remained silent, listening intently for some sound to tell him how matters stood.

After what seemed an age—but in reality, only a few moments—he fancied he could distinguish a faint rustling noise, at only a few yards' distance; but if so, the person, whoever it might be, was going from him, as the next moment he lost the sound entirely. John felt if his weapons were in readiness for use, and then glided forward, as noiselessly as possible, toward the point from whence had proceeded the suspicious noise.

Again he heard the sound, and now could quite plainly distinguish the fall of irregular footsteps, evidently made by a human being. Believing they were those of Asamee, and burning to wreak a bitter revenge upon him for the threats and abuse he had so plentifully bestowed upon him when a captain, Stevens drew his knife and followed the footsteps, displaying considerable skill for one so little versed in woodcraft as he was, making scarcely more noise than the velvet-pawed panther when stealing upon its prey.

It was a difficult matter, this running through the tangled woods, but above the noise made by himself, Stevens could hear that of the other, showing that both had to encounter the same difficulties. Then came a low, gasping cry—a heavy fall, and then John was upon the fugitive with knife uplifted to deal the fatal blow.

But the gleaming weapon descended harmlessly, and also a cry of wonder broke from his lips as he touched the prostrate form. *He felt the flowing drapery of a woman's dress!*

"Mercy—mercy!" gasped the latter, in a voice trembling with fear and apprehension.

That voice! How well John knew it! No danger of his confounding it with any other.

"Annie—you here!" he uttered, in a tone of wondering surprise.

"Mercy—have mercy!"

It was evident that the maiden did not recognize his voice. Her terror construed it into that of a deadly foe; thirsting for her life.

"Annie—don't you know me? It is John—John Stevens," and he bent over the prostrate and trembling form, winding his arms tenderly about her, pressing his lips to her cold brow.

It was the first time he had ever ventured so far, but the strange and exciting circumstances must be his excuse. And the course, too, answered a good purpose, for the maiden recog-

nized him then, and with a low cry, flung her arms around his neck, sobbing hysterically.

"John—thank God!" murmured Annie, sobbing from excess of joy. "I thought it was an Indian."

"No, it is me," he added; a rather needless assertion, but he was hardly accountable for his words or actions then, as he clasped the lovely form closely to his breast, and pressed more than one fervent kiss upon her lips, now unresisting.

But then Annie started up with a little cry. The truth had flashed upon her mind, and brought her back once more to the stern realities of this life.

"I forgot—my father, mother—where are they?"

"Don't you know? Where did they leave you? And you have not told me how it is I find you here alone, at night," added John, curiously.

"We were afraid of the Indians, and left home, intending to call for your folks and then try to reach the lower settlements. But something—somebody shot at us and frightened the horses. Mine ran beneath a low limb, and I was brushed from his back. The fall must have stunned me for a time, because I heard nothing more of them. Then as I got up and walked away, trying to find where they went, I heard you after me, and thought it was an Indian. The rest you know," hurriedly explained the maiden.

"I'm afraid we're all in a bad fix, Annie. If you look, you can see the light from your house now. Dusky Dick set it on fire. Our home is on fire, too. No—don't be frightened; the folks were not in it. Fred came there and alarmed us, and I started on ahead to tell your folks the news, but got captured by the Indians. Fred said he would bring on the others to your house, when we all could go together."

"And father is on the way up there! He will get killed—I know it!"

"You said Tobe Castor was with them?"

"Yes, he came just before dark."

"Then he will save them from that: He is too old and cunning to walk blindly into such a scrape. But *you* I am troubled the most about now."

"Hark!" whispered Annie, as a startling sound broke the stillness of the air.

It was a loud, hoarse shout, closely followed by a shrill yell; and the confused noise as of a mortal struggle between strong men. John quickly divined the cause.

"It is your friends, returned to look for you. They have met the Indian who was with the one I killed. Do you stay here while I go forward and help them."

"No, I will go along," and then the young couple glided rapidly toward the spot from whence proceeded the confused sounds.

It was indeed as John had surmised. Tobe Castor had come into collision with Asamee, and, well matched in point of strength and dexterity, they were now rolling over the ground in a life and death grapple.

Tobe had made one blow, his knife sinking deep into the shoulder of the savage, inflicting a painful flesh wound, but in no wise disabling

him. As he received the wound, Asamee gave a quick twist that wrenched the knife from Castor's hand, tearing it from the wound, and hurling it several yards away.

However, he found his own hands full without attempting to draw a weapon, and it bade fair to result in a test of relative strength and endurance; their arms wound about each other, as they strove desperately for the mastery. But such was not to be the case.

Stevens dashed up, and paused before the contestants, with ready knife. He could not distinguish one from the other; and then, resolving to chance it, he spoke out:

"Who is it—white or red?"

"Both, I reckon—I kin answer fer the white, anyhow," muttered Castor, the words issuing by jerks. "Who're you?"

"John Stevens—let me help you," and the young man strove in vain to gain a fair stroke at Asamee.

"Gi' me the knife, hyar!" and as he spoke, Castor wrenched one arm loose, and then dashed his fist with crashing force full in the red-skin's face, who fell back, confused and bewildered.

Then Castor seized the proffered weapon. One quick, deadly thrust, and the contest was ended. Tobe coolly wrenched off the scalp, and then arose, puffing and blowing like a human porpoise.

"Wolf! Tough dog *thet*, fer a red. E'ena'-most squeeze my outsides in; durned ef he didn't! But how'd you come here? Hain't see'd nothin' o' ary stray gal—"

"Uncle Tobe, where are father and mother?" said Annie, springing forward, now assured that the strife was ended, by the conversation.

"Ge—thunder!" ejaculated Tobe in amazement. "What next? The gal—ef 'tain't, then I'm a liar!" and the old scout clasped Annie to his breast in a genuine "bear's hug," at the same time carrying the simile further by an uncouth shuffle, quite as graceful as some of Bruin's most finished antics.

"Don't, you'll smother her!" cried John; and, lover-like, there was a tinge of uneasiness in his tones, as he beheld another perform the same thing he had, only a few minutes before; but *then* it was all right.

"Nary time—will it honey? Gals ain't easy smothered *thet*-a-way. B'ar a good deal o' huggin', them critters will. Kinder comes nat'ral to 'em, I guess. Lord bless ye, honey! I've a good mind to scold ye, right peert, now, fer your skeerin' us all so pesky bad!" but instead, Tobe smacked her lips right heartily.

"There, there, uncle Tobe!" and Annie twisted from his grasp. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself—at such a time, too. But where are they?"

"The old folks? Out yonder. They hid while I kem back to hunt you up, a'ter you jumped off to hunt *this* feller up. Did, didn't you? Then how did you chance to find him?"

"This is hardly the time for joking, Castor," rather crustily interjected John.

"Right you be. Thar—I'm sober as a judge. But findin' *thet* honey-bird thar, jest sorter sot me crazy. Did, fer a fact! Jest sot me right on eend, like. Made me feel good—kinder squirmish all over, an' it had to come out

or bu'st; which wouldn't 'a' b'en pleasant—the bu'stin' part, I mean. But come—the old folks 'll be mighty oneasy until we git back. Gi' me your hand, honey, an' you, John, keep cluss op."

"Where do you intend going, Castor?"

"To your house, a'ter others."

"Our house is like that of Mr. Wilson's—on fire, or burned to the ground by this time. You can't see the light from here; but we did, a little back."

"You don't—then whar's your folks?" exclaimed Tobe, anxiously.

"Out in the woods somewhere. Fred gave the alarm—he overheard the plan as he was coming through the woods toward our house. He sent me ahead to warn Mr. Wilson, but Dusky Dick's devils captured me. I saw him set fire to Wilson's house."

"And how'd you git away?"

"He set off after you—along the Lower Trace—and sent me, with two Indians as guards, to join Sloan Young's gang. We heard your horses, and one of them ran out to see who it was. I killed the one left with me. You finished the other, just now," hastily exclaimed John.

"You don't tell me! Gi' me your hand—no, thar hain't no time for that now, but you're a trump, anyhow, if I do say so. It's a peskier job 'n I 'lotted on, durned if 'tain't, now. Hev to use right smart head-work to git out on it, too, ef we don't mind. Drat the imps—what's got into 'em, anyhow?" and Tobe spoke in a voice of intense disgust.

"What do you think best to be done, now?"

"Don't talk—I've got to *think*. Take the gal, an' keep cluss ahind me. Thar—so."

John passed one arm around the lithe waist of the maiden, who shrunk back at first, but then, as his pressure increased, she yielded, and felt all the better for so doing. Really, despite their ominous surroundings, the young couple were progressing finely.

Not another word was spoken until Tobe Castor paused and uttered the agreed upon signal; the cry of the nighthawk. Then Wilson and his wife sprung forward from their covert.

"Annie—our child—where is she?" gasped the mother, breathlessly.

"Here, mother!" and then the trio were locked in a close and warm embrace.

Tobe touched Stevens upon the arm, and drew him to one side. They were the only ones of the party fit for sober consultation now.

"You say that pesky half-breed, Sloan Young, was at your house?" asked the old scout.

"Yes. I heard Dusky Dick say so."

"You don't think he—that is, you think the folks got out safe?"

"I do. If not, we would have heard of it. There was no shooting. Besides, Fred got there soon after dark, and was to start right away for here. He feared an attack would be made upon his people, too."

"Then they're on the road *sowewhars*. They must 'a' see'd the light, as they hed higher ground to look frum 'n we had. O' course Young 'd set out a'ter 'em, hut-fut. Then you say Dusky went out torst the settlements?"

"Yes; along the Lower Trace. He believed you had gone that way."

"I 'lowed he should. But mayhap 't would 'a' bin better if we hed 'a' kep' on, as't turns out now. We'll hev 'em both 'afore an' ahind now, durn 'em! But we'll hev to run the chances fer all I see," gloomily muttered Tobe.

"But our folks—what about them?" and there was a deep anxiety visible in the young man's voice as he spoke.

"They're in the hands o' the good Lord, boy. We can't do nothin' fer 'em now, unless we stumble onto 'em, like. The boy's with 'em, you say, an' he's wu'th a heap in a muss like this 'ere. If so be it's to be, they'll git through all safe; but if not, then the Lord have marcy on tha'r souls!" solemnly added the hunter.

"Amen! But I fear the worst. I wish I was with them now."

"You could do them but little good, if the worst is to come. Fred is thar, an' now you must kind o' take his place here. We'll need our best licks to bring 'em through though, I'm afeerd."

"Tobe," said Wilson, approaching him, "what've we to do, now? Annie says Fred is not at Stevens's."

"We must 'bout face, an' strike for the settlements. Not deerect thar, fer Dusky Dick is 'tween us an' them; but by a sort o' circumbendibus like, thet'll throw them off o' the scent. We'll b'ar to the east—"

The further speech of the old hunter was abruptly cut short, by a series of thrilling sounds. Full well the little party knew the meaning of these, and each one shuddered convulsively at the dire visions conjured up before their mind's eye.

A rifle-shot, a shrill yell—other shots, followed by more cries and yells; then a wild uproar, as of deadly strife, at close quarters.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FOREST TRAGEDY.

WE will now turn to and trace up the fortunes of the little party whom we left just quitting the "lodge by the rock," and entering the gloomy forest.

A longing, lingering look was cast back at the rude but loved structure, which had sheltered them for so long a time. But there was no retreating now.

Fred was probably the most anxious one of the party, for he knew, better far than they, the real extent of the peril that menaced.

He was not without some experience in Indian-fighting, for before they removed to Minnesota, he had spent several winters trapping in the Blackfoot country, and with Tobe Castor, had more than once made his mark upon the persons of the dusky-skinned heathen. And since his residence here, Fred had kept his woodcraft brushed up, by long hunting excursions with the old scout.

So he cautioned his companions to step lightly and to avoid all conversation, while he glided on some yards in advance, trusting to discover any impending danger long enough beforehand to guard them from it. Their progress was necessarily slow, but the value of the young ranger's precautions was soon made apparent.

Fred's keen ear caught the sounds of approaching footsteps, and rapidly falling back, he

drew his companions to one side of the narrow trace, where they crouched down amid the bushes. Fred knelt before them, his weapons ready for instant use, in case a collision was unavoidable.

The light pattering sound drew nearer, and then one form after another glided directly past the fugitives, who even held their breath, so imminent seemed the risk of discovery. Then the last link of the living chain passed by, and was lost to view amid the dense shadows.

Not until the last sound died utterly away, did Fred venture to move or speak. Then his voice was low, but full of uneasiness.

"It was Sloan Young's gang. I recognized him. They have gone to your home, and when they find their plans are discovered they will be after us, half-wild!"

"Then let us hasten on at once," impatiently muttered Stevens. "We can reach your house by the time they get to ours. With such a start there is no danger of their overtaking us."

"Not so. You forget that Dusky Dick's gang is somewhere near here, and if we run across him, then we are lost indeed. A rifle-shot would call those devils back, and then we would be massacred in a moment—or else saved for the torture. No, we must use more caution now than ever. Will you be guided by me? I have had more experience in these matters than you have, or I should not ask such a thing," added Fred, modestly.

"Yes—we will do as you say. Only be quick!"

"Then we will go on as before. Only be as cautious in stepping as possible, and don't press too close upon me."

Fred re-entered the path and glided on in advance. He felt extreme anxiety as to the probable result of the venture, now that he knew foes were both before and behind.

He was also anxious regarding the result of John Stevens's errand. If he had been delayed, or had anything happened to prevent his gaining the cabin, matters would be gloomy indeed.

Dusky Dick was evidently up to mischief, and as he was not with Sloan Young, what more likely than that he would pay a visit to the Wilson cabin? Should he do so, and find the inmates unsuspecting of their danger, an easy victory would be his. No wonder the young settler felt worried.

And then he abruptly paused, with a slight exclamation of dismay. Before him he could distinguish the fast-widening trace of a conflagration; the sky was rapidly reddening with what he knew must be the glare of a burning cabin—and that cabin none other than his own!

"See! the devils are at work!" he hissed, in a strained and unnatural voice, as his companions drew nearer. "It is our cabin on fire!"

The little party stood in mute anxiety. Their eyes roved from one face to another. A terrible fear was upon them.

They could just distinguish the sound of shrill yells, as of Indians, borne to their ears by the favoring breeze. It sounded like the death-knell to all their hopes.

"What will you do now, Fred?" asked Stevens, breaking the painful silence.

"I must go ahead and see what that means. If John has been delayed by anything, I fear the worst—all is lost. And it looks that way, for I hear no shooting."

"Will it be safe?"

"Not for the rest of you. You must stay here until I can find out how the ground lies. It would be worse than folly to go forward now, not knowing who we may meet. Come out here—it will be safer. So if any red-skins chance along the trace, they will not discover you, if you are anyways care'ul."

Fred did not pause for a reply, but led the way out a few yards from the trail. Then he bade the fugitives crouch down amid the underbrush and await his return, which would be as speedy as possible.

"Would it not be better for us to keep right on toward the settlements? It seems dangerous to waste time waiting here, like this."

"No, it would never do. You would only lose your way, if indeed you did not run into some ambush. You must stay here until I come back. It is the best you can do, now."

"But hasten, then," and the settler composed himself to await the result with such patience as he could summon.

As Fred glided noiselessly away through the gloom, a chill fell upon the spirits of the little party, that seemed a premonition of coming danger. Stevens started to his feet, intending to venture all, rather than remain there in suspense, but the women finally persuaded him to abide by the decision of the young ranger, whose experience in such matters was far the greatest.

To increase their anxiety, they now perceived the glow that marked the destruction of their own home.

The minutes rolled on, each one seeming like an hour of ordinary time, and still no signs of Fred's return. Then came a rifle-shot from some point not far distant—a wild yell, followed by the loud crashing of what seemed horses' hoofs, passing through the forest at headlong speed. Tremblingly the three fugitives awaited the result, fearing to move from their covert.

The glowing beacon upon either hand of them grew more faint as the moments passed on, and then were entirely shut out from view by the gathering clouds, and the thickly-clustering tree-tops.

And still no sign of Fred's return. Stevens could stand the suspense no longer, but arose to his feet, saying:

"I will wait no longer. Something must have happened, or he would have been back long ago. It is throwing away our only chance by stopping here. Come, let us go."

"But Fred said—" uttered Jennie, falteringly.

"I know that, but something must have happened to hinder his coming back. If we stay here, we will only be smelled out and killed by these murdering red-skins. Come on," decisively added Stevens, as he moved away from the spot.

The women knew well that resistance would be in vain, and arose to obey.

Stevens did not think it prudent to travel in the beaten trace, lest he should meet some of the enemy, and so kept along through the forest, using such skill as he was possessed of, to proceed silently.

But the danger foreseen by Fred, proved well founded. In the very outset the borderer went astray. He had lost his bearings, and instead of proceeding toward the lower settlements, he was pursuing an almost directly opposite direction, or nearly toward his own cabin—or where that had previously stood.

In evading the tree-trunks and clumps of bushes, he deviated from a direct course, now bearing to the right, now left, until he almost struck the beaten trail they had lately traversed when led by Fred Wilson. And then Stevens ran headlong into the very danger he was most anxious to avoid.

The settler came first, then his wife, and after her, Jennie. The dress of the latter caught upon a root, and she paused to loosen it; a fact that probably saved her life.

For just then a wild yell rung out from close before Stevens, accompanied by a sharp crack and broad glare that lighted up the scene for a moment, with startling vividness. By it the settler saw the dusky figures of some half-score savages, and with the impulse of the moment, he threw up his rifle, firing at the foremost one.

A thrilling death-yell that followed told that his shot had not been spent in vain, but then a return volley rung out, and he staggered back, wounded unto death. He stumbled over the prostrate form of his wife, whom the first shot had stricken down, but recovered himself as the enemy sprung forward with exultant whoops and yells.

For a brief moment the settler battled with frantic fury, but all was in vain. The bullet that first struck him had reached the seat of life, and then a knife pierced his side. Still defiant, he sunk down, with a hoarse cry, upon the body of his murdered wife. And over them raged the red-skins, fighting for the coveted scalps like demons incarnate.

Jennie was sheltered by the intervening tree-trunk, and although more than one bullet shattered the rough bark, she was unharmed. Terror held her enchained to the spot, despite herself.

Then she heard the dying cry of her father, and knew that all was lost. With a low cry of agony she turned and fled through the forest, half dead with horror.

The red-skins scrambling for the coveted trophies, heard her not, but one other ear did; that of Sloan Young, and divining the truth, he sprung forward after the fleeing girl, and knew that the coveted prize he feared was lost, was now just within his grasp. He gave vent to a long, loud yell of diabolical exultation.

But Jennie's feet seemed gifted with more than mortal speed, and she fled over the rough ground, through the bushes and tangled shrubbery, fully holding her vantage-ground, hard as the half-breed strove to overtake her. Uttering furious curses, he dashed madly on—to his death!

Jennie sped on, blindly, half unconsciously. She knew not her own danger; she only felt

some frightful danger was driving her on, she knew not whither.

She sped on past a dark, crouching form, and then felt, rather than saw, another figure rise up before her. With a low, gasping moan she sunk unresistingly into the outstretched arms; her senses fled and she fainted.

The half-breed also heard the cry and answered it with one of exultant triumph, for he believed that the fugitive must soon drop from exhaustion, when she would become an easy prey to him. But he was doomed to a bitter disappointment.

He noted the abrupt cessation of Jennie's footsteps, and tricky himself, he suspected some ruse upon her part; most probably an attempt at doubling upon him. To defeat this he paused and listened intently.

He saw a dark figure rise up almost within arm's length of him, and believing it to be his intended victim, he sprung forward with outstretched arms, crying:

"You may as well gi' up, my dear—"

Thus far he spoke, and no further. For a strong hand clutched his throat, and as the tall form towered above him, the gleam of a descending knife-blade filled his eyes. The half-breed made one desperate effort to free himself; he was not given time for more.

But he was held like a child, and then the keen knife hissed down—then with a horrible thud, the hilt fairly struck against his chest. The long blade had cloven his heart in twain.

Still he made a desperate effort—his death-throe, it was—and freed his throat from the vise-like grip fastened upon it. A single wild yell broke from his lips, and then he sunk a lifeless weight in the arms of his conqueror, a corpse.

Still the alarm was given, and that last cry bade fair to avenge its author's death. For it had reached the ears of the still scuffling savages and awoke them to their folly.

They recognized the voice of their leader, and one of them had placed the sound; and he quickly communicated it to his comrades. Then, with shrill yells of anger they sprung forward, eager to assist or avenge their chief, as the case might be.

"Put the gal down, Jack," muttered Tobo Castor—for it was indeed him—speaking in a quick tone. "The imps is a-comin' hot fut. Let the women hunker down cluss ahind the log. It's fight now, an' we'll hev our hands full 'thout them!"

The trio—Castor, Wilson and Stevens—drew together, the better to meet the shock they knew must soon come.

The three women had been placed in a clump of bushes bordering and overhanging a large fallen tree, and against this, on the opposite side, the men backed, as by it they secured themselves from being assailed upon all sides at the same time. Tobo again spoke:

"Fire as I do, an' then down on yer faces. Ef they shoot at the bleeze, thet'll mebbe save us. Then do the best you know how, with cold steel an' clubbed rifles, ef so be they make a rush."

There was no time for further instructions, if such had been needed. But the others knew what lay before them well enough. They knew

it would probably result in a hand-to-hand combat, that could scarcely end otherwise than in their destruction. And yet they did not flinch. They had dear and helpless ones to fight for, as well as their own lives.

The yelling red-skins came on at full speed, until within a short distance of the borderers, when they abruptly paused; the ominous stillness awed them. They could not comprehend it.

One Eye did not answer; then he must be dead. Nothing could be heard of his slayer or slayers. Therefore they could not have fled, or the sound of their footsteps would have been heard.

But then the more impatient of the Sioux gave a cry and sprung forward. The rest followed in a compact mass; a fatal move on their part.

The three men standing beside the fallen tree could now faintly distinguish the enemy as they surmounted a slight knoll. Knowing the advantage of a first blow, Castor leveled his rifle, the action being closely imitated by his comrades, and then fired.

The three reports sounded almost as one, and carried death and dismay into the ranks of the Sioux. The horrible death-yells and groans of agony told how fatal had been the discharge, and, as with one impulse, the survivors broke and fled, without firing one shot.

But this panic was only momentary. Then they rallied, and proceeded to concert some plan for the revenge the blood of their fallen comrades demanded at their hands.

The three borderers dropped to the ground, as agreed upon, but this precaution was needless, as we have already seen. Then they began hurriedly recharging their weapons, full well knowing there would be further need of them, ere the affair was over.

"They are driven back—why not take the women and slip away?" whispered Wilson, cautiously, he being nearest to Tobe.

"Don't be a fool, Ed—don't, for marcy's sake. They'd hear us, an' then we'd be in a nice fix—I guess *not*. That's jest what they want the most. They don't know how we're fixed now, and 'll fight shy for a time. No, we must stick it out here—for a time, anyhow."

Their weapons recharged, the three men crouched down in anxious waiting. Especially was John Stevens troubled.

He feared the worst. He had found Jennie, his sister, fleeing from a spot where had been going on a desperate fight for life. But where were the others? his father and mother? Were they dead, or also fugitives in the forest?

That was a query he feared to answer, but something down in his heart told him that a great calamity had occurred, that he was now parentless.

Fortunately he had something to distract his thoughts, in a measure. Otherwise he would have gone mad. But now he must bear up for the sake of his sister—his loved one and her friends.

The groans of the dying wretches had ceased, and all was once more still in the forest. Even the insects had seemed to cease their humming, and the faint breeze to die utterly away. The stillness was awful—depressing in the extreme.

For despite this seeming peacefulness, they well knew that bloodthirsty and unscrupulous foes were busily compassing their destruction. They knew that some subtle plot was being concocted by the savages, who would be fairly wild with rage and thirst for revenge. This suspense was harder to bear than the deadliest strife would have been, for while they knew their peril was imminent, they knew not in which direction it would first appear, nor the shape it would assume.

But they had not long to wait for the knowledge. A faint rustling sound at some little distance first met their vigilant ears, although no human form could be seen. This for a time puzzled them, as the sound appeared confined to a circumscribed space, near the little knoll upon which the Indians had stood when the fatal volley was discharged at them.

Then the rustling ceased, and another sound took its place. Castor uttered a grunt of dismay, as though he comprehended the meaning of this. Wilson whispered:

"What is it, Tobe?"

"Wait an' you'll see soon a plenty. *Cuss the pesky imps!*" and the old scout fairly ground his teeth with intense ire.

And in the course of a few moments they *did* see, sure enough. A faint, flickering glow—not a blaze, at least visible to them—shone forth upon the knoll, only a few yards distant from its crest. At this moment, Stevens and Wilson divined the truth, as Castor had already done.

The Indians were building a fire!

Their object in thus doing was plain. They felt assured their enemy had not fled, and by this light they counted upon discovering their covert, without serious risk to themselves.

"*Cuss the imps!*" hissed Castor, wrathfully. "He's hid behind a rock or log or somethin' else, or I'd soon sicken the dog, fer good. But we must git out o' here, jest the quickest!"

"But how? Surely they wouldn't leave a path open for us? They must have surrounded us, to guard against any move like that," muttered Wilson.

"I know that—I ain't sech a pesky fool as to make a run for it, yit. But ef we stay here telt that light bleeces up—as 'twill shortly—we're gone suckers, fer shore! But we must git over the log, here. That's a big fork in it, where we kin hunker down, an' hev the bushes fer kiver, too. Then they can't rout us out 'thout makin' a rush fer it; which they won't be apt to do afore day, anyhow. So up with ye, one at a time, an' git the wimmen onder kiver."

"You go first—if you know where the fork is."

"I'd orter know—seein's as how I durned nigh broke my neck over the pesky thing a-tumblin' down whar we run up, a bit ago. But when you come don't make no n'se, 'less you'll hev a load o' lead in your karkidge as 'll be mighty onhandy to kerry about."

So speaking, the old scout cautiously rose up and crawled upon the log. The fire was now blazing up quite briskly, and already casting out a circle of light that nearly reached the tree-trunk. There was no time to be lost.

Jennie was still half-senseless, and, stooping, the old scout gently raised her in his arms, and,

in a low, guarded whisper, bade the other two women follow him. Though trembling with apprehension, they obeyed, without a word.

Castor glided through the bushes, along the log for a few paces, and then pausing, lowered Jennie to the ground. It was a narrow space between two forks of the tree, that were here some two feet in thickness, while over and around them, grew a dense fringe of bushes and vines.

There was ample room for the entire party, and while hidden from the enemies' view, by lying down, they were protected in a great measure from any bullets that might be discharged into their covert. Upon this fact Tobe had counted when he determined to remove from the spot rendered untenable by the rapidly-increasing light of the fire.

The women safe placed, Castor turned and whispered to his comrades. Wilson was already over the log, and Stevens speedily followed his example. Then they sought the new refuge, where they knelt down with senses upon the keen alert, and rifles ready for use.

"You wimmen keep cluss," continued Castor. "Them pesky reds is mighty keerless, sometimes, an' one o' tha'r bullits mought chance to hit ye."

"What do you think they will do now?" anxiously queried Wilson.

"Don't know. Tell you better a'ter a bit. But then you'll know jest as soon's I will, come to think o' it. Hist! jes' lis'en to *that*!"

This exclamation was drawn forth by a series of sounds that suddenly broke the stillness of the forest. They seemed to come from every point of the compass, forming a terribly significant concert, when the listeners so well knew the true performers.

The faint howling as of wolves; the whistle of the nighthawk; the chirp of the tree-toad or ground squirrel; the mournful cry of the rain-crow—with still other sounds, came from the forest depths, telling the fugitives that their foes were upon the alert—that they were surrounded by a cordon of bloodthirsty and cunning enemies.

The fire blazed higher and more brightly, casting a flood of light over all surrounding objects, plainly revealing the long log, behind which crouched the fugitives. But still, not a trace of the savages could be seen, though keen and practiced eyes swept every foot of the ground revealed.

Then the signals abruptly ceased, and even the fire appeared to burn without noise. A stillness as of death swept over the forest. The moment of action was evidently nigh at hand.

"Keep your eyes peeled, boys," muttered Tobe Castor, as his teeth clinched and his eyes glittered with a strange glow. "They know jest about whar we be, an' 'll show thar hands 'fore long. Plug the fust varmint as you kin draw a bead on, but don't waste 'ary shot."

It was evident that the savages had determined upon the position of the fugitives, but then a wide stretch was given them, for the log was some fifty or sixty feet in length, the entire body of it fringed with bushes, any point along it sufficiently dense for the fugitives to hide in. This fact alone kept the Indians from making a desperate onset at once.

Then a rifle-shot rung out from the gloom beyond the broad circle of light. The bullet sunk with a dull thud into the decayed log, some feet from the fugitives.

Another and another rung forth, from different points of the compass, but still not a cry or a sound came to tell the Indians of the exact spot occupied by their intended victims. One of the bullets tore its way through the cheek of Tobe Castor, but he did not flinch or move, save to brush the hot blood from his eyes.

Then a series of cries ran along the cordon of dusky warriors. Its meaning was comprehended by the old scout, who muttered:

"It's comin' in airnest, now, boys! Pick yer game an' drap it. Then load up, ef you hev time."

The words still bitted upon his lips, when a wild whoop resounded from every side of their position; and then a number of dusky figures appeared in view. But they did not advance boldly; instead, they sprung from side to side, yelling frightfully and brandishing their weapons in the air above their heads.

Castor was too wise a veteran to be fooled in the manner they evidently counted upon. His hands checked the less experienced men, whose eyes were already glancing along their rifle-barrels.

"Don't shoot—fer yer lives don't shoot yit!" he hissed, warningly. "They on'y want to find out whar we be. Don't ye see? Wait until they make a general rush."

His prudence was soon confirmed, for like magic the yelling crowd and the dim, phantom-like figures disappeared as though they had sunk into the ground. Evidently the red-skins were puzzled, knowing now that either their prey had fled, or else they were far more cunning than they had given them credit for.

Thus another half-hour expired, and still no direct assault was made, although an occasional shot was discharged into the bush-screened log. An overruling Providence seemed to shield the fugitives, for as yet, the crease upon Tobe Castor's cheek was the only wound the party had received.

Then Tobe gave a faint hiss. His comrades gazed in the direction his finger pointed, and they beheld a faint, shadowy figure upon the ground, at only a few yards' distance. Under other circumstances this would hardly have been noticed, or if so, would have been thought a mere shadow; but now, with his senses sharpened by peril, Castor knew that it was the form of an Indian, who was crawling up toward them, evidently with the intention of learning their exact position.

"Leave the imp to me," muttered Tobe; "keep a good lookout on your side for more o' the same sort. Don't let 'em fool ye!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A STROKE FOR VENGEANCE.

WITH painfully throbbing heart, Fred Wilson left his companions and hastened along the narrow trace toward the blazing cabin, to learn the fate of his family. He dreaded the worst, for a strange sensation of coming evil weighed heavily upon his mind.

Still it did not prevent him from displaying

his usual caution and skill, and he glided along the path, dark and gloomy though the woods were, with almost the certainty and ease he would have displayed in broad daylight. Only at times could he distinguish the red-lush glow of the blazing cabin; at others the densely clustering boughs concealed it from his vision.

In this manner he had proceeded over half a mile, when he fancied he heard the faint sound of cautious footfalls before him. Instantly pausing, he bent his ear to the ground. He was not deceived; some person or persons were coming toward him.

With a wild hope in his heart, the young scout softly drew to one side of the trace, and crouched down beside the trunk of a large tree, in such a position that the passers-by, whoever they might chance to be, would be momentarily outlined against a rift in the tree-tops beyond.

The catlike footfalls came nearer, and then the travelers passed before him. In the first one he recognized an Indian. He could just distinguish the nodding plumes upon his head.

And then the next one he noticed was the same. But he had, unfortunately, looked one moment too long upon the first passer. By so doing, he only caught a faint glimpse of the second. The last he saw more closely.

There were only three in number, and he believed them all Indians. Had he known the truth, the entire course of the after events of that memorable night would have been changed; perhaps for the better.

For had he known that his friend, John Stevens, was of the number, he would have dared all to rescue him, and thus learn definitely how the young settler's mission had terminated. But he was not aware of this, and so suffered them to pass by unchallenged.

Fred then arose and pressed rapidly on, his mind filled with conflicting emotions. This party were coming direct from the burning building; then what was he fated to find there? All was still in that direction. Was the tragedy over?

And then the young man paused upon the edge of the clearing. With wildly-beating heart he gazed out upon the scene of destruction that lay before him.

The cabin was one mass of glowing coals, though as yet the walls were standing. And though his eyes roved keenly around upon the smooth ground before the building, the dreaded sight met not his gaze. He had feared he would behold the dead and mangled corpses of his family lying there, weltering in their blood.

But, as we know, this sight did not greet his eyes, and he derived some faint consolation from it. All might not yet be lost.

And with these thoughts, he began cautiously circling around the clearing, too wise to venture within the broad circle of light, while ignorant whether there might not be a score of his enemies lurking near, watching for some other unwary victim.

He had gained a position nearly opposite the point where he had first stood, when he received an evidence of the prudence of his caution. A tall, dark form emerged from the shadows near the mouth of the trace, and then strode rapidly toward the building.

Just then the walls fell in with a loud jar, and as the sparks ascended skyward in a dense cloud, the blaze burst out afresh, and cast a still more brilliant light over the scene. By its aid, Fred could see that the new-comer was an Indian, and an angry glow filled his heart, as he reflected that this same savage might have been an active agent in the death of his family. For the young man still believed that he would find them dead. In no other way could he account for the strange depression that weighed upon his spirits.

And he resolved that this one, at least, should never live to boast of his bloody deeds. He should die, and by his hand. And then he set about compassing this end.

In this point again fortune seemed favoring him. The red-skin stood motionless for a moment, his eyes roving keenly around the clearing; then his tall form stooped, and he glided to and fro, evidently searching for some sign.

Fred waited in eager anticipation for a moment more favorable than this, although the range was short, and he could easily have picked off the savage with his rifle. But this was a move he did not fancy, as he did not know how many red-skins might be within hearing, and with the lives of others partly depending upon him, Fred dared not run the risk of a shot. The blow must be dealt with cold steel, if at all.

The red-skin ceased his zigzag movements, and now proceeded in a direct line. Fred knew that he was following some trail, and to his stern delight, found that trail led the Indian toward the lower trace.

With sternly-compressed lips and eyes glowing with a strange light, the young scout glided rapidly toward the point where the trace began, a long, keen knife firmly clinched in his hand. He was none too soon, for scarcely had he crouched behind a tree-trunk, than the Indian entered the bushes, his head still bowed toward the ground.

Then he paused, with a slight grunt, as of disappointment. It was none other than the petty chief who had been with One Eye, or Sloan Young, and who had started off to put Dusky Dick upon the watch when it was found the Stevens family had fled.

Fred Wilson collected his energies and sprung upon the unprepared red-skin, knife in hand. Ere the assailed could lift a finger in self-defense, the keen weapon hissed through the air and then buried itself, with a peculiar *thud*, deep in his broad chest.

A low, gurgling cry arose to his lips, but then died away with the gush of blood that filled his throat. Then, as the knife was withdrawn, the tall form, so lately full of life and strength, tottered and sunk to the ground, a lump of lifeless clay.

"You are the first one—but will not be the last, by many more!" muttered the young scout, with a terrible depth of hatred and revenge in his tones, as he stooped over the dead man and adroitly removed his scalp.

Then he suddenly sprung erect. A significant sound met his ear. A rifle-shot—an Indian yell, at no very great distance.

It apparently proceeded from near the spot where he had left the Stevens family, and Fred

feared they had been discovered by the Sioux. He could do no good by remaining here, as there were no traces of his family, and he resolved to return at once, though fearing it would be too late.

The young scout was not one to hesitate, when once his mind was made up, and securing the gory scalp to his waist, he entered the forest once more, gliding with speedy footsteps toward the point where he had left his friends in hiding. Still, despite his rapid progress, he was too late.

As he neared the covert, he uttered the signal agreed upon, but without an answer. Then he crept forward to the clump of bushes. He parted them and peered inside. They were untenanted by those whom he sought.

Fred stood in angry disappointment, not unmingled with apprehension. He did not know whether Stevens had disobeyed his strict injunctions, and ventured forth in an attempt to escape unaided, or whether he had been surprised and taken prisoner, and he dared not strike a light to discover, lest it should prove a beacon to guide a treacherous bullet or arrow to his life.

Then, as he stood there, another sound met his ear; one similar to that which had drawn him from the clearing, only louder and more protracted. Two single rifle-shots and then what seemed a united volley, accompanied by wild yells and whoops.

There could be no mistaking this. He knew that one party, at least, of his friends had been attacked by the Indians; most likely those whom he had taken under his own charge.

He did not hesitate, only long enough to determine the direction and probable distance of the strife from where he stood, and then pressed forward toward it, with as much speed as was consistent with safety. And now he displayed in an astonishing degree the skill he had attained, thanks to the instructions of Tobe Castor.

He glided through the forest at a half-run, with apparently as much ease and celerity as though the intense gloom was replaced by broad daylight, seeming to avoid the tree-trunks and other obstacles by intuition. And his footfalls made scarcely more noise than those of the deer, traversing its course with unhasted steps.

Fred could still distinguish the faint sound of yells and cries, as though the strife still continued, though there were no more rifle-shots. This fact puzzled him not a little, though he did not slacken his pace.

Then the yells seemed to shift places, continuing only for a few moments; then dying entirely away. Then again came the loud reports of firearms, with shrill howls of anguish and terror. The plot was becoming somewhat tangled and complicated, and Fred's wonder increased.

Still he proceeded, though more deliberately, for under the circumstances he thought prudence was the wisest course for him to follow. Then he uttered a little exclamation as his foot struck against something yielding. There could be no mistaking this peculiar touch; he knew that he was standing over a corpse!

A convulsive shudder ran through his frame

as he leaped back a pace; but then he conquered this involuntary repugnance, and advancing, stooped over the form. Eyesight could avail him nothing here; the sense of feeling alone must be depended upon.

His hand touched the body, and a thrill pervaded his form as his fingers rested upon a soft, slimy substance. He knew it was blood, fast coagulating. Then a glad hope filled his heart as his hand encountered the smooth-shaven crown, with the long scalp-lock of an Indian. Perhaps his friends had not perished, after all!

He slowly moved away from the corpse, feeling along the ground with his feet, but for some moments, felt in vain. Then he again touched something that he knew was another victim.

Stooping, his hand rested upon the unmistakable dress of a white man. Gliding up the body, he then felt of the face. The long heavy beard there confirmed his suspicions. He felt assured that the dead body of Wesley Stevens lay before him.

And then a low cry of agonized horror broke from his lips as he touched a woman's dress. He staggered back and sunk to the ground, trembling and unnerved. He feared the worst. He dreaded to move, lest he should find the dead and mangled corpse of his loved one—of sweet Jennie Stevens.

But then with an effort he aroused himself, and without a thought for the danger he might thus incur, he struck a match and bent over the forms of the ill-fated fugitives. By its faint, flickering rays he recognized the father and mother; the light also showed him the bare and gory skulls where the scalps had been ruthlessly torn away.

He only saw this much, when the match burned to his finger tips and then expired. Tremblingly he essayed to light another, but he was too greatly unnerved. He sunk down upon the blood-stained ground and covered his eyes, as though he would shut out the horrible vision that filled his brain.

It was a moment of frightful torture, and it seemed as though he would go mad. He believed that the dear one, whom he loved better than his own life, was lying near at hand, dead—murdered like her parents.

But then with an effort he aroused up. Though sick at heart, his hands were steady as he struck another match. He had nerved himself to bear the worst now.

The light cast a faint glow around, but the dreaded sight did not meet his staring eyes. As he strode around the spot, hope sprung up in his heart once more.

A whip-like report broke the stillness of the air, so close that Fred started back and dropped the match, believing that he had been the target. But then he beheld his mistake, as another and yet another shot rung out at some little distance to his left. He also heard shrill yells, that he knew could only proceed from the throats of red-skins.

His eyes flashed instinctively, and he clutched his rifle with a firm grip. He remembered now the second series of shots and yells he had heard; these were probably a continuation of those. If so, then the savages who had slain his friends

were yet at hand, and if Jennie was taken a prisoner, she must be there also.

If so, perhaps he could effect her rescue now. But then, who could be the ones at whom the shots were fired? His family? Fred uttered a low cry of eager hope as this idea flashed across his mind.

The young scout listened for a moment, and then glided forward in the direction from whence came the sounds. Scarcely had he made the first step when the cries died away. But still advancing, Fred soon caught a glimpse of a bright light before him.

More cautiously he crept on, every sense upon the keen alert, until he paused beside a huge tree whose butt was surrounded by a dense growth of bushes, and then gazed out upon the scene. He beheld a huge bonfire blazing upon a slight knoll. But not a living figure was in sight.

Then as he gazed, a dark figure glided between him and the fire; the light, shining brightly, revealed the features of an Indian. Then, like a shadow, this melted away. The stillness began to be oppressive, and Fred could scarcely comprehend the drama that was being enacted before him.

Leaving the tree, he glided stealthily along through the gloom, intending to incircle the bonfire and discover, if possible, who were attacked by the Indians. He knew there were enemies close about him, and he brought his keenest powers into play, making scarcely more noise than would have done a serpent.

He had gone but a few yards when he heard a slight rustling a little to one side, and pausing, he speedily distinguished the form of a man, evidently a red-skin. It seemed as though he must be discovered, and Fred drew his limbs together for the emergency; but the savage brushed past him, almost close enough for their extended arms to have met. If he saw the dusky figure of the young scout, he evidently mistook it for one of his own comrades.

With a long-drawn breath of relief, Fred passed on, his eyes roving keenly in every direction. Keeping at a certain distance from the fire, he had covered nearly one-fourth of the distance necessary for a complete circuit, when a new peril threatened him; one that he did not see in time to avoid.

He noted the form of an Indian coming toward him, just without the circle of light. Anxiously he watched the movements of his foe. He could not retreat, as that would only subject him to suspicion and the red-man was so close that the slightest movement would be heard.

And yet the savage was coming directly toward him. Fred crouched lower and drew his knife partly from its sheath. He had not time for more, when the savage paused directly beside him, his eyes bent upon a long line of bushes at but a few paces distance. Then he spoke in a low tone, using the Sioux dialect.

"Gray Bull is creeping up to find the pale-faces. Let my brother keep his rifle ready to shoot them as they spring up."

Fred did not reply, lest his voice should betray him, but he stealthily drew his knife from its sheath. Then the savage turned toward him, in evident surprise at not being answered.

The fire blazed up afresh, as the topmost sticks broke and fell down. A ray of light penetrated the bushes, and fell fairly athwart the pale features of the scout and those of his copper-tinted companion.

Fred beheld the wondering look—the quick change that told of recognition, and knew that only the promptest action could preserve his life. His left hand shot out and clutched the throat of the red-skin, and then the keen knife hissed through the air.

But with a sudden start back, the Indian freed his throat in time to utter a wild yell of alarm, ere the weapon drank his life's blood. Then for a brief moment all was still.

Then a single rifle-shot rung out, and Fred felt the bullet crease his neck. He knew that he was discovered and leaping to his feet he leveled his rifle at an advancing Indian and fired. Then with a hoarse, defiant shout, mingled with a death-yell from the stricken savage, he turned and fled from the spot.

A frightful tumult arose, and the woods echoed with the swift, heavy tramp of the Sioux as they dashed in hot pursuit after their daring foe.

CHAPTER IX.

OUT OF THE TRAP.

TOBE CASTOR keenly watched the slowly approaching red-skin. He could long since have disposed of him by a rifle-shot, had he felt so inclined; but that he did not choose to do. If he did, then the main object of the savages would be accomplished. Once given the exact position of the pale-faces, such a storm of bullets would be poured in upon them that death would be inevitable.

The old scout had decided upon a plan of action that he believed might work, though the chances were greatly against it. He saw that the red-skin would strike the bushes, if he maintained the course he had begun, at only a few feet from where crouched the fugitives.

The bushes, interlaced with vines and creepers, were very dense, and a person standing close upon the outside could not perceive those within, by night, unless he first parted the screen. This was what the savage would have to do, in case he accomplished his object.

Castor hoped to be able to quiet this dangerous customer with the knife, and so quietly that those who were watching his progress, would still be at a loss as to their exact whereabouts. It would be difficult, though he believed it could be done.

Warning his comrades by a gesture to remain perfectly quiet, the old scout moved along by slow degrees so as to intercept the savage. When the point was gained directly in front of the creeping figure, Castor paused and prepared his knife for use.

But the trial was not yet to come. A strange and unexpected interruption came and afforded the besieged a respite, none the less welcome, because unlooked for.

There resounded a hoarse, gurgling yell—a rifle-shot—another, and then the defiant shout in the unmistakable voice of a white man. Following, came wild cries and whoops from the red-skins.

It was indeed the discovery of the young scout, Fred Wilson, although his friends did not know it. And a most fortunate occurrence it proved to be, at least for them.

The savages were bewildered, and knew not what to make of the affair. But then all seemed clear.

The strange silence of the pale-faces was now explained. They no longer wondered that no reply had come from the bush-screened log, when they had so plentifully bestowed their leaden favors upon it. They had been upon a false scent all the time. The hated pale-faces were not there, but had given them the slip, and but for a fortunate discovery would have crept entirely away and left them in the lurch.

Much in this manner the Sioux reasoned, and then with their thrilling war-whoop, they bounded after the fleeing scout, eager for his scalp, though they believed it was the entire party instead of only one. Their own footfalls prevented them from learning their mistake, by the tramp of the fugitive.

The red-skin who had acted on the "forlorn hope" also sprung up and dashed away to join the pursuit. Others dashed by, while the concealed fugitives held their breath at the strange proceeding.

Castor turned and glided back to join his companions. He was as greatly puzzled as were the others.

"What is it, Tobe? I thought that sounded like Fred's voice," whispered Wilson.

"I didn't notice; but the last shot favored his gun mightily. Could it be him?"

"Mayn't it be a trick of theirs to get us to show ourselves?" suggested John Stevens.

"It mought, but I sca'cely think it. You see, too many o' them went. An' they're kerryin' it too fur. Lis'en—you kin hear 'em a-screechin' 'way off thar yit," and Tobe hearkened intently.

"What shall we do! Stay here, or try to slip off?"

"Jest as you think best. I b'lieve our plan is to travel. It may be a trick, an' ef so, we're gone, shore. Ef not, we stand a show. Anyhow, ef we stay here ontel day, they'll hev us then, easy. But jest as you say, on'y be quick 'bout it, 'ca'se thar's no time to waste."

"I think we had better risk it," added Wilson, resolutely.

"All right, then. Here goes. I'll show up fu'st, an' ef they don't plug me, do you foller. Step as though you was a-walkin' on sleepin' rat-tlers, an' don't make no fuss. Ready?"

A murmur gave assent, and then Tobe emerged from his covert, crouching low down in the shade cast by the bushes, and gliding off from the fire. Not a sound betrayed the presence of any enemy, and the others ventured forth, using the same precautions that their leader had taken.

They proceeded thus for full a hundred yards, when Castor halted them. They paused in momentary alarm, but his first words banished their apprehensions.

"It's all right yit. I on'y wanted to tell you what we must do. We'll have to take to the hosses, ef the imps hain't found them, or they hain't broken loose. Then we kin 'ither take the

trace, or cut through the woods, jest's you think best."

"We leave it all to you. But it's dangerous stopping here so close. Some of those devils may come back and stumble upon us."

"The more haste the wuss speed, you know. You must wait here until I go an see if the animiles is safe. They may hev found 'em an' left a guard thar to cut us off ef we tried to git to 'em. You wait here ontel you hear me whistle; then come on as quiet as you kin."

With these words Castor glided away in the darkness, leaving the little party to uneasily await the result of his scout. But a few moments of suspense were they forced to endure; then came the welcome whistle, and with glad hearts they pressed forward. In a few moments more they were beside the horses, that still stood as they had been left.

It will be remembered that the Wilson party were yet consulting as to the best course for them to pursue, at the point where Castor had left the husband and wife, while he sought for the missing Annie, when the uproar attending the attack upon the Stevens family broke upon their hearing. Suspecting the truth, the party had left the horses as they were hitched, and rushed forward toward the spot, hoping to be enabled to assist their friends. Thus it is that we find them once more in possession of their animals.

"Now here's four critters, an' thar's six o' us. Let the wimmen an' Ed ride—he's the least able to stand a ja'nt afoot. Up with ye—no talkin', Ed. Ef so be't any one o' us two gits tuckered out, we'll change 'th you."

In another score of moments the little party were ready for a start. Tobe Castor led the way, then the horses, and after them came John Stevens.

By mutual consent the old scout was allowed to direct their course, and he chose to proceed, for some time at least, through the forest as being safer than treading in the beaten trace. He knew that along it had hastened Dusky Dick and his gang of cut-throats, and felt assured that they would soon discover the ruse by which they had been deceived, and thus would naturally turn back to find where they had lost the trail. By following the trace, there would be danger of meeting him.

It was tedious traveling, but it was the road to safety, and the fugitives bore their hardships with as good a grace as possible. The spirits of all were gloomy enough, but the hearts of the brother and sister were sore indeed.

Jennie had told her story, and they knew their parents were both dead. The blow was a bitter one, and only for the absolute necessity for their restraining their feelings, in order to preserve their own lives, both of them would have given way beneath it.

And thus the night wore on. The forest was traversed and left behind the fugitives, who had placed a full score of miles behind them ere the light of day came over the western hills.

The eyes of the old scout, who was some yards ahead of the party, roved keenly and anxiously over the country, searching for what he hoped not to find; some trace of their enemies. And for a time he was agreeably disappointed.

They were now in a sort of open prairie, at this point rolling and uneven. Scattered hither and yon were small clumps of trees surrounded with smaller bushes and shrubs. The prairie was covered nearly waist-deep with a coarse grass, thickly mixed with weeds.

To the left of the party, and extending some little distance to their rear, was a line or chain of hills, rocky and bleak-looking. They were not far distant at this point, hardly a mile.

"Do you see any thing, Tobe?" asked Wilson, uneasily, glancing at the guide.

"Yas—a plenty, but nothin' to git skeered at, as I knows on. I don't see ary a red. Reckon we gi' them the dirty shake last night."

"I hope so. But will it be safe to rest a bit? The women need it, and so do the animals. A bite of food will do no harm—though we have no water."

"I don't know but 'twould be best. We must stop some time, an' now's jest as good a time's any. Thar at thet motte yander, we'll stop. Thar's a good spring, too. So we'll not go thu'sty," said Castor, indicating a small clump of timber some few hundred yards before them.

The fugitives were now upon a ridge, whose height afforded them a fair view of the country, and while Castor spoke, his eyes were keenly scrutinizing the prairie beyond. He suddenly paused, with a cry of angry dismay.

"What is it, Tobe?" cried Stevens, gliding forward.

"Look yander!—*Injuns, by the 'tarnal!*" hissed the old ranger, as he extended an arm before him.

Thus directed, the gaze of the party was riveted upon an alarming sight. And as they gazed, their hearts sunk within them, for they saw that Castor was right.

Upon a ridge at perhaps a half-mile distance, could plainly be distinguished a number of footmen, whose wild aspect as their plumed and ornamented crests rose above the tall, still grass, told they were indeed savages. Their number could not be much less than a score; perhaps more.

"Let's get out of sight in the hollow," muttered Stevens as he sprang to the head of Annie's horse. "Quick! before they see us!"

"Too late—too late, boy!" muttered Castor, his glowing eyes sweeping around their position. "D'y' hear that?"

As he spoke, faint, far-away yells of discovery came to their ears, borne upon the light breeze. And then the savages were observed to bound forward toward them, spreading out as if to surround their intended prey.

"Quick! to the timber—it is our only chance now!" shouted Stevens excitedly, as he urged the snorting horse forward.

"Back—hold on, boy," cried Castor, a determined expression resting upon his countenance. "T'won't do—they'd rout us out o' thar in a minnit. We must try somethin' else."

"But what? My God! man, do you intend to stay here and let them murder us all?" almost shrieked Wilson.

"No—follow me. Let the hosses went—don't hold 'em in. Keep up 'th me ef you kill the critters!"

As Tobe spoke, he turned abruptly to the left,

and dashed off at full speed. For a moment the others hesitated, but his decisive action overruled their doubts, and they hotly followed in his lead.

It seemed a suicidal course, this one of the old scout's, for he was leaving the friendly motte almost directly behind him, and was speeding over the rolling prairie toward a point where there was nothing to be seen save a bare hillside. And after them came the wildly yelling red-skins, who now seemed confident of their prey, for the thick, tangled weeds impeded the advance of a horse still more than that of a footman.

CHAPTER X.

A DOUBLE CHASE.

FRED WILSON little guessed the good his daring course had accomplished for his friends, or he would not have so bitterly cursed his foolhardy daring in thus running into such a scrape. But the harm was done and he could only strive his best to free himself from the dangerous position it threw him into.

He slung his rifle across his back by the strap appended, and thus with his arms free, he dashed on with renewed speed; though the best pace one could maintain there in such dense woods, was comparatively slow. Still it tried one the greater, for a tree-trunk would not be visible until almost run against, and then a quick, active leap was necessary to avoid it.

Fred could hear the rush of many feet behind him, and also the continued signaling of his foes, telling him that a stern race for life and death was to be the result. And almost unconsciously the presentiment that had before assailed him, returned with augmented force.

Still he did not falter or neglect a single precaution by which his case might be aided. His mind was made up to adopt a bold ruse, and now he strained every nerve to its utmost tension in order to gain the necessary vantage ground that would enable him to put this plan into execution.

As he gained the beaten trace, Wilson turned and dashed down it, although he would lose some ground if his pursuers had spread out, as he felt assured they had. But then he could place full confidence in his fleetness of foot, and felt that with a clear road, he could easily regain the ground thus lost.

Along the path he sped until he reached and passed the still-glowing embers of his late home. But when about a half-mile beyond this, he deemed his chance good enough, and pausing beneath a huge tree, he clutched a low limb and adroitly swung himself up into the branches. Here he lay still, striving to quiet his hard and rapid breathing, lest it should betray his hiding.

It was a full minute before the first red-skin passed beneath his perch, and Fred found that he had gained more ground than he had supposed. Not noticing the sudden cessation of his footsteps, the Sioux pressed on at hot speed, little dreaming how narrowly they were missing their intended victim.

For some time after their passing Fred remained motionless, but then he stealthily crept up higher until near the tree-top, where he could

remain hidden, even in the daytime, safe from all prying eyes, unless their owner should take a fancy to climb the tree and make a close examination; an occurrence that was not at all likely to take place, as Fred's footprints had, in all probability, been obliterated by those of the running savages.

For full an hour Fred remained there, but then, hearing no sound of his foes, he descended, and struck once more into the woods. He had pondered long and well over his situation, and knowing he could effect nothing for his friends, owing to his ignorance of their whereabouts, he had resolved to set out for the settlements, and, if possible, there raise a force and return and either rescue them, if captured, or avenge their murder, if dead, as he feared they were.

Before the day broke he had gained the open prairie, and then paused in a clump of trees, in order to see if the coast was clear for his future progress, as soon as the sun should arise. To hasten this end, he scaled a tall tree, and from its top-branches, he eagerly scanned the prairie, as well as the dim light would admit.

But until the sun had fairly arisen, his search was useless. Then, however, his heart beat rapidly, and he saw how wise had been his precaution.

At nearly a mile's distance, he could just distinguish the forms of a number of human beings. Keenly observing them, he first saw that they were in the direct track, and were approaching him at a rapid pace. Then he perceived that they were Indians.

Fred hastily descended a few feet to where the limbs were thick, and then crouched down, his eyes once more bent fixedly upon the foe. The sun shone full upon them now, and he counted over a score in all.

As they descended into the hollow, he lost sight of them for a moment, but then they reappeared upon the crest, next to the one upon which stood the grove he had sought refuge in. The trace ran within a few yards of this motte, and the young man began to feel apprehensive as to his own safety.

The savages kept on, and now Fred could distinguish the form and features of a white man; of Dusky Dick, and his teeth grated fiercely together as he felt a stern desire to avenge the supposed destruction of his family upon the renegade. But to do so now would be equivalent to his own death.

Then the party gained the ridge, and paused; some pointing toward the motte where the young man was concealed. As Fred watched their every motion, he heard them yell wildly, and believed he was discovered.

Throwing forward his rifle-muzzle, he glanced along the barrel. The double sights drew full upon the head of the renegade, and only a slight pressure of the forefinger would have sounded Dusky Dick's death-knell.

But that pressure was not given, for just then the red-skins, led by Dusky Dick, turned and dashed down the hill-side, with long, loud yells. In surprise Fred glanced at the further ridge, and a cry of wonder broke from his lips.

He could quite plainly distinguish another party; these unmistakably white. He also noted the flowing drapery of women; three in number.

And then the truth burst upon his mind like a revelation.

These were his friends, who had successfully passed through the trials of that eventful night, only to be again confronted by their bitter and relentless enemies, when just upon the verge of safety!

As he beheld them turn and flee, Fred hastily descended from his perch, and then, without thought or reflecting upon the risk he would thus incur, he dashed down the hill after the red-skins. Fortunately for him, the entire thoughts of the Indians were turned upon the fugitives before them, and not a backward glance was given, or else this rash move would probably have resulted fatally for the young ranger. And then they gained the ridge and passed beyond his sight.

Before he also gained the crest, Fred's natural good sense returned, and he proceeded with more circumspection.

He kept tolerably well screened by the tall weeds, while descending, until the savages were once more hidden from view behind a swell; and then he dashed on with the velocity of a race-horse. As he gained the second crest, Fred again paused.

He could still distinguish both parties, and then, as his eyes rested upon the hills beyond, a glad cry broke from his lips, a bright light filled his eyes, and after hesitating for a moment, he turned and dashed at full speed along the back track, his eyes sparkling with a new-born determination.

CHAPTER XI.

AT BAY!

TOBE CASTOR led the way at a rapid pace, his tall form making some fairly wonderful leaps, doubling up in order to carry his long legs clear of the dense weeds and shrubs. At any other time his queer antics would have provoked a smile from the spectators, but now they were entirely too much concerned about their own safety to indulge in such demonstrations.

Behind them, at less than a half-mile's distance, were a score of bloodthirsty demons, yelling and whooping in eager exultation, as though their hands were already upon the coveted scalps, and all resistance was over. This knowledge, then, was not the most favorable for awakening a sense of the ludicrous, and the only idea his great bounds called forth was a desire to keep pace with him.

More than once the old scout was forced to slacken his pace, so as to avoid distancing the jaded horses, and an uneasy light filled his eyes as he noted how rapidly the savages were coming up with them, lessening the intervening distance with every bound. And yet not more than one-half the distance to the hill had been covered.

"Make haste, Ed—dog-on it, man, put the critters down to it!" he hissed, impatiently, at one of these slackenings. "Use your knife for a spur."

"Where are you going? They're overtaking us fast!" apprehensively cried the old settler, glancing back over his shoulder.

"To the hill yander—ef they let us. Use the knife, I tell ye—ef you don't, we're goners!"

Under the impulse of this novel spur, the horses dashed forward with considerably aug-

mented speed, and now the hills loomed up quite near. But so were the red-skins, who now began sending their compliments after the fugitives, in the shape of sundry leaden bullets, but as the Indians feared to pause in order to secure a good aim, lest the fugitives should thus be able to distance them, there was little to dread save from some random missile.

Tobe Castor then cried out:

"Foller right on through the openin' thar; then turn to your left, right sharp."

As he uttered these words, the old scout dashed ahead at an astonishing rate of speed, and entered a narrow defile or pass, that here cut through the range of hills. As his comrades could see, he turned to the left, as he had directed them to do.

With anxiously-beating hearts, the fugitives dashed through the pass, and then, guided by a loud cry in the voice of their friend, turned to the left and reached the spot where he was standing.

"'Light—quicker'n thunder! You wimmen run into them bushes thar, an' lay close. Ed, you an' Jack stan' by me. We'll sicken the imps fer good, this time!" hurriedly muttered the scout, as he lifted Jennie Stevens from his horse's back; then striking the animal violently with his hand, it dashed off at full speed along the hill's foot.

The other two women leaped to the ground, as did Wilson, who secured the bundle of provisions, half-unconsciously. And this move was completed none too soon, for the next moment the yelling savages sprung into view through the pass, brandishing their weapons like mad.

"Now—gi' them your rifles, an' then fall back to the bresh yander. Ef they foller, let 'em hev your 'volvers," cried Tobe Castor, as his long, heavy rifle uprose to a level.

The Indians paused abruptly, uttering cries of wondering dismay. Why this bold stand upon the part of the fugitives, and where were the women who had so lately been with them? Could they still be fleeing upon the horses, whose rapidly-retreating hoof-strokes could still be distinguished?

"Now!" hissed Castor, and the three rifles spoke.

Two of the enemy went down without a struggle; a third reeled back with an arm swinging helplessly at his side. But neither of them was the renegade; he had not yet put in an appearance.

"Now drap back to the bresh, boys," and Tobe coolly retreated.

Just then Dusky Dick sprung into view, and with a wild yell, urged his men on. As the borderers fell back, the Sioux dashed ahead, discharging a few arrows; their firearms had all been long since emptied.

"Gi' them some more!" coolly muttered Tobe, as he drew a heavy revolver, "Colt's Army," carrying a half-ounce ball with the range and force of a rifle.

And now quick and vicious the reports ring out from the three men standing there at bay. Chamber after chamber was discharged with fair effect.

It was not Indian nature to stand this long, more especially as they had not the means of re-

turning the compliment. Dusky Dick was one of the first to fall, and then, missing his voice, his men retreated to the entrance of the gap, concealing themselves as best they could behind the numerous bowlders that there skirted the prairie.

"Into the bresh an' load up, boys!" said the scout, as he coolly leveled his second pistol at a wounded red-skin, who was slowly crawling away from the spot of death.

The revolver cracked, and the Indian made no further motion. Then, with a grim smile, the old scout also entered the bushes.

A most welcome surprise here awaited the fugitives, with the exception of Castor. The mouth of a cave was revealed behind the bushes, and into it the women had already made their way.

This, then, was why Castor had made what had seemed, at the time, a suicidal move, in not taking to the timber motte, and Wilson now expressed his regret at having spoken so harshly upon that occasion.

"Tain't no matter, Ed. I don't blame you, for it *did* look a little queer. But it was our on'y chaine, ye see. They'd 'a' cabbidged us thar, easy; but in here we kin hold our own ontel they starve us out. This is whar Fred 'n' me killed the b'ar this spring—'member, don't ye?"

"Yes, but—what's the matter now?"

Castor had turned around to peer through the bushes while speaking, and then with a bitter curse of angry chagrin he leveled his pistol and fired. Another curse broke from his lips, as he half-parted the bushes, as though he would have sprung forth.

"What is it—are they coming again?" and the two men pressed forward.

"No—he's gone, the pesky imp! He was a-playin' 'possum all the time, I do r'ailly b'lieve! Don't b'lieve he was tetched ary time!"

"Who—what do you mean?"

"Why, Dusky Dick, in co'se. He's gone. I see'd him jest as he was a-stealin' out o' sight. I sent a snap-shot at the cuss, but didn't tech him. I spotted him in the fu'st rush, but he must 'a' dodged it, an' then tumbled down to make us b'lieve he was dead," somewhat incoherently added Castor, as he once more resumed loading his firearms.

Though greatly chagrined, the borderers completed recharging their weapons without further comment, meanwhile keeping a close watch upon the open ground around the mouth of the defile. They felt assured that their foes were still near, although concealed from sight, and that they would not abandon the hunt without a desperate effort to avenge the death of their comrades, several of whose bodies still lay out in full view, stark and ghastly.

"What do you think they'll do next, Tobe?" queried Wilson dubiously.

"Mebbe make a rush—but I don't think it. They've hed too good a taste o' our shooters fer thet. We must look out fer tricks, now; they'll prob'ly try sarcumvention fu'st. Mebbe try to smoke us out."

"But can they do it?"

"Not bad, they cain't. Jest step inside thar, an' you'll see. I ain't so pesky green as to run

in a hole that'd be stopped up like *that*," chuckled the old ranger grimly.

Wilson stooped low down and entered the rude entrance of the cave, but it soon enlarged sufficiently to admit of his standing erect, and he gazed curiously around him. It was dimly lighted, but sufficiently so for him to discern the rocky sides and roof.

It was small, not twenty feet in diameter at the most, and of a rude circular form. The roof was arched, jagged and uneven, composed mainly of rock. From several points Wilson could detect a lighter ray than common, and he knew that there were numerous crevices leading to the outer world, by which the fresh air could gain entrance, although so crooked that no use could be made of them to gain a shot at those within. Thus it would be an utter impossibility for the cave to be filled completely with smoke, or even sufficient to smother its inmates.

The three women were huddled together upon the rocky floor, at the further extremity of the den, trembling with apprehension. Wilson approached them, and tried to relieve their fears by repeating the assurances of Tobe Castor. At this they brightened up a little, but only temporarily.

A low whistle from Castor now drew Wilson to the entrance, where he was cautioned to silence by a finger warningly upheld by the old scout. Listening intently, the settler fancied he could hear the sound of cautious footsteps overhead.

Nothing was to be seen upon the plain beyond, save the dead savages. All was quiet at the entrance of the defile, but still the besieged knew that trouble was brewing. And they nerved themselves to meet it as best they could.

"Ready, boys," muttered Tobe, drawing back a little, until beneath the projecting shelf. "They're comin' now!"

And the next moment confirmed his assertion, for with loud yells several dark figures sprung down from the ledge, alighting in the midst of the bushes. There, ere they could recover themselves, the affray began.

The pale-faces had the advantage of a dark background, while their foes were quite plainly revealed, and as the revolvers began to play rapidly, wild yells of rage and death agony told how true was their aim.

And then, from the prairie beyond, came the sounds of rushing feet, and the shrill war-whoop of the savage Sioux, telling of a simultaneous onset deadly and determined.

CHAPTER XII.

EXIT DUSKY!

It was a thrilling moment. Death stared the borderers full in the face, yet they did not flinch. To do so would be annihilation, and full well they knew that.

The enemy who had sprung down from above, had probably hoped to take them by surprise, being ignorant of the existence of the cave, and thus hold them at bay until the others could approach from the defile below, to deal the finishing stroke. But in this they had counted without their host, and the ready action of the borderers speedily foiled their calculations.

Scarcely had the savages regained their feet

from the leap, than they were down again; this time for good. Three revolvers make quick work, especially when the targets are at barely more than arm's length, and held by desperate men, who are fighting for their own lives, as well as those of ones even more dear to them.

Thus before those coming from the defile could reach the bushes, the first portion of the drama was over. Four dead or disabled forms lay there; but where were the fugitive pale-faces? They speedily received the answer to this natural query.

"Back inside the hole, boys," uttered Tobe. "Back, or we're gone! We must keep 'em from gittin' inside."

And then at the mouth of the cave, but upon either side, where their bodies were partly shielded by the jagged rocks, although where a shot could be aimed without, if necessary, crouched the three men, sternly defiant. And thus, with tightly-compressed lips they awaited the assault, their rifles and half-empty pistols ready for instant use.

Thus they were, when the savages reached the bushes and parted them. Scarcely had the enemy time to note the mouth of the cave, thus laid bare, when a simultaneous report rung out, and three rifle-bullets tore their way through the living mass.

The Indians staggered and fell back involuntarily, but not until a second salute was given them. And then, despite the curses of Dusky Dick, the entire party of survivors turned and fled in dismay, not even pausing to remove their dead and dying.

The besieged, fearing a ruse, did not emerge, and then Dusky Dick once more succeeded in gaining cover in safety. And then while one kept guard, the other two borderers hastily recharged the weapons, that had stood them in such good stead.

For at least two hours after this signal repulse not a sound betrayed the proximity of a foe, but the old scout knew that the bushes screening the cave-entrance were under the range of keen eyes, whose owners would be only too glad of the chance to guide a bullet or an arrow into any one of the besieged who might chance to expose himself. And he was too wise to allow either of his comrades to commit an action that might change the whole situation.

Then there came an interruption. The sound of a human voice was heard; the voice of a white man, for the words were accented in a manner that no Indian could attain.

"Hellow thar, you Wilson!"

"It is Dusky Dick," muttered Tobe Castor.

"What can he want? Shall I answer him?"

"Yas—but don't show yourself. 'Twon't do no harm to hear what the cuss hes to say, as I knows on," slowly returned the scout.

"Hallo yourself! What is it you want with me, Dusky Dick?"

"I want to have a quiet talk with you, and see if we can't come to some sort o' terms. Will I be safe if I come out thar? It's too fur away to talk from here."

"Tell him yas—ef he comes alone," said Tobe, in reply to the glance of Wilson.

"Yes. Come out, and if you act on the square you sha'n't be hurt. But come alone, and mind

you, don't let any of your red-skinned devils try to crawl up on us, or you're a dead man. We can see all over from here."

After a few moments' silence, the renegade arose from behind his covert, and strode toward the cave-entrance. Although he bore weapons, they were held carelessly, as if not for use.

"Hold on thar, Mister Dusky Dick, called out the old scout when the renegade was within a score of yards. "Don't come no nearer. You hain't got the consumption, an' ken talk that fur I reckon."

"Tobe Castor!" exclaimed Morgan, in a tone of uneasiness.

"Yas—it's old Tobe, fer shore. You know 'im, I reckon," chuckled the scout, grimly, evidently pleased at this symptom of alarm.

"I did not know you were here, but it don't matter. Who is the head man among you? You or Wilson?"

"You kin talk to Ed, here. I'll sorter lis'en. Shoot off yer mouth now, lively, an' then travel. Your comp'ny ain't overly welcome to none on us. D'ye hear?"

"Then, Wilson," added Morgan, not noticing the insulting tones of Castor, "what're your terms? You must see there is no use in your trying to hold out against us any longer."

"Isn't there? Your men didn't seem to think so, a while since, anyhow," sneered the settler.

"But we have been reinforced since then. Sloan Young is here with his band, and—"

"You lie, Dusky Dick, durn ye. You'll never see Young ontel the devil hes his due. It's *thar* you'll find him, fer I put a eend to *his* trapsein', this very night jest passed," retorted Castor.

What Dusky Dick's answer would have been, was never known, for at that moment a sharp report rung out from close behind Wilson, and with a choking groan the doomed renegade swayed feebly to and fro for a moment, then sunk to the ground.

Quickly turning, the two borderers beheld the strangely convulsed features of their young comrade, John Stevens, as he glared out upon the dead man, the smoke still issuing from his rifle-muzzle. The peculiar gleam in his eyes told he was half-crazed.

The reproaches of the old scout died away upon his lips, for the young settler then sunk back, pale and breathless, his features strangely distorted. He was in a fit, probably brought on by the terrible trials of mind, added to the deed of vengeance he had just accomplished.

The Sioux uttered frightful yells of anger at the death of their chief, but did not venture from their covert. They had already received a sufficiency of the pale-faces' favors at close quarters, and had evidently resolved to await the slower but more sure process of starvation.

It was some little time before John recovered from his convulsion, as there was no water to aid in his restoration, and then he lay back, only half conscious, as weak as a child.

As the time wore on, the besieged began to suffer from want of water. Their hunger had been appeased, but it only seemed to increase their thirst. And yet there was not a single drop to be had.

Their prospects looked gloomy, indeed, for if they began to suffer thus early what would they

be forced to endure, were they closely besieged, as there seemed no doubt they would be? Even Castor became gloomy and despondent.

Thus the hours rolled by, without any demonstrations from the Sioux, save occasionally a rifle-shot that either flattened harmlessly outside, or else spent its force against the walls of the cave, without injury to the occupants.

But when the shades of night fell, the Indians built several fires upon the prairie, around the besieged, and though at some little distance, yet close enough to guard against their stealing forth from their retreat unobserved. They made no attempt to surprise the cave inmates, and well for them that they did not, for both Castor and Wilson kept unceasing watch, with weapons in readiness to repel the assault, in case it should come.

But toward morning, when the gray light in the east gave warning of the coming sun, there arose a fearful tumult without, awakening the sleeping women, who uttered loud cries of afright. And for a moment the two sentinels were confused.

But the truth flashed upon their minds. They knew they were saved!

"Hooray! they're jest *more'n* ketchin' it!" yelled Castor, as he sprung forth from the cave, uttering his wild war-cry; and then, closely followed by Wilson, he dashed into the thick of the *melee*.

They were indeed rescued, and by the aid of Fred Wilson. When that worthy so abruptly turned from the chase, he knew the plans of Tobe Castor. He remembered the bear's den, and saw that the fugitives were heading directly toward it. Here he knew they could stand a pretty tough siege, and so he resolved to speed at once to the settlements, raise a force sufficient to rescue them, and return speedily.

He succeeded in reaching Hutchinson, where he told his story, and found no difficulty in raising a squad of men sufficient for his purpose. In half an hour after his arrival, he was on the back track, and by hurrying on at full speed, he arrived in time to surprise the Indians, the most of whom were sleeping.

The onslaught was deadly, and but few of the war-party escaped to tell the tragic tale. Then the stray horses were hunted up, and upon these the women and John were placed, when the party retraced their steps to the settlement.

Dusky Dick had been somewhat premature in his attack, as the general uprising did not take place for two days after, and the result of that is familiar to all readers.

Tobe Castor, John Stevens and Fred Wilson did good service in the cause, and passed unharmed through the ordeal. They found and buried the remains of the unfortunate settler and his wife, near the ruins of their former home.

Within a year after the events recorded, there occurred a double wedding at St. Paul, in which Annie and Jennie, John and Fred were the principal actors, though an outsider would have thought Tobe Castor divided the honors pretty equally with them. That he "*jest more'n* spread hisself," upon the occasion, we have his own word for.

THE END.

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